SNAKE DOCTOR

SNAKE DOCTOR
AND OTHER STORIES

THE WORKS OF

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SNAKE DOCTOR AND OTHER STORIES

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SNAKE DOCTOR AND OTHER STORIES. I

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TO

RAY LONG, Esq.

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SNAKE DOCTOR
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CHAPTER I

SNAKE DOCTOR*

IN THE North they call them devil's darning needles. But in the South they are snake doctors, and for a reason. These harmless and decorative dragon-flies with their slim arrow-like bodies, their quick darting flight and their filmy wings, as though the arrows had been fletched with bits of drawn lace, are clothed, down there, with a curious fetish. When a cotton-mouth is sick—and if his feelings match his disposition he must be sick most of the time—the snake doctor comes hurrying to him with the medication for what ails him. Perhaps seventy-five or a hundred years ago some slave newly in from Africa saw a cotton-mouth moccasin sunning its flat, heart-shaped head on top of the yellow creek water, and along the creek came flashing one of these swift creatures seeking a perch upon which to leave its eggs, and the black man saw it suddenly check and hover and stand at poise in

* Winner of the O. Henry Memorial Award Committee's first prize for the best short story published in 1922.

the air an inch above the snake's still head, and from that figured this strange bug was a voodoo bug, ministering to the ailing reptile. In such a matter any man's theory is as good as the next one's. The provable thing is that a good many of the whites and more than a good many of the negroes believe in the fable for a fact; and nearly all of them, regardless of color, know the libeled insect as snake doctor.

Now, one of the men I have intent to write about here was known as Snake Doctor, too; and for this, also, there were reasons. To begin with, he was very long and thin, a mere rack of bones held together under the casing of a taut yellow skin; and he had popped, staring eyes, and was amazingly fast in his bodily movements. See him slipping through the willows, so furtive and quick and diffident, with his inadequately small head, his sloped shoulders, his erratic side-steppings this way or that, and thereby inevitably you were reminded of his namesake. You were bound to think of the one when you thought of the other; just naturally you couldn't help it. To top the analogy, he lived right among the moccasins, taking no harm from them and having no fear of them, seemingly.

Along Cashier Creek, where they throve in a wicked abundance, was his regular ranging ground. His cabin stood in the bottoms near a place notorious for its snakes. They were his friends, so to speak. He caught them and

with his bare hands he handled them as a butcher might handle links of sausage. He sold them, once in a while, to naturalists or showmen or zoological collectors: there was a taxidermist in Memphis who was an occasional customer of his. In the season he rendered down their soft fat and drew it off in bottles and retailed it; snake oil being held a sovereign remedy for rheumatism.

By such traffickings he was locally reputed to have made large sums of money. But he rarely spent any of this money; so he went by the name of miser, also. Well, in a way of speaking, he was a miser; he zealously coveted what he got and kept it hidden away in the chinking of his log shack. But he was nowhere near so well-off as the community gave him credit for being. The snake business is a confined and an uncertain business and restricted, moreover, to its special markets. A dealer's stock in trade may be plentiful, as in this case, but his patrons must be sought. To be exact, Snake Doctor had ninety-seven dollars in his cache.

But swearing to the truth of this on a stack of Bibles a mile high wouldn't have made the people in the Cashier Creek country have it so. Popular opinion insisted on multiplying his means and then adding naughts. Nor could you, by any argument, have won over his neighbors, white or black, to a fair estimate of the man's real self, which was that here merely

was a poor, shy, lonely eccentric touched in the head by hot suns and perhaps by spells of recurrent swamp fevers.

They had contempt for him but mixed in with the contempt was fear. To them he was to be shunned as one having commerce on familiar footing with the most loathly and the most hated of all the creatures that crawl. There was a solitary exception to the current rule of prejudice; a single individual among them who had compassion for him and a measure of understanding and right appraisal of him. This individual, curiously enough, was a woman. She was a minority of one. We'll come to her presently. The rest had forgotten his proper name or else had never heard it. By their majority voice he was Ole Snake Doctor. They knew he was familiar with the ways of the cotton-mouth; they half believed he spoke its language.

In this particular region ordinary folks believed many things that weren't so. Superstition, growing out of ignorance, had twisted honest nature into a myriad of perverted and detractive shapes. The innocent little blue-streaked lizard was a "scorpyun" and its sting killed. A porous white stone found in the bellies of rutting deer was the only known cure for a mad dog's bite; clap it on the wound and it clung fast like a leech and sucked the poison out. You never saw many jay-birds in the woods between dinner-time and dusk on a Fri-

day because then nearly all the jay-birds had gone below to tell the news of a malicious world to their master, the devil. You rarely could hit a rain crow with a rifle bullet because this slim, brown, nervous bird enjoyed the special protection of old Nick. If a snapping-turtle clamped his jaws down on your flesh he wouldn't let go till it thundered. A breath of warm air blowing across your path on a cool night in the woods meant a "witch-hag" had passed that way.

Or take snakes: The Prophet of Old put the curse on them forever after when in his story of the Garden he typified evil as a serpent; mankind has been enlarging the slander ever since. Moreover, in these parts, Caucasian ingenuity as regards snakes and their ways had overlaid a deep embroidery of ill-repute upon an already rich background of African folklore. There was the hoop snake, which is mischievous and very deadly, and wears a deadly horn in its head, and there was the joint snake, which is a freak; both fabulous but both accepted as verities. All well-meaning snakes lay under the scandalous ban. Milk snakes, garter snakes, chicken snakes, puff adders, blue racers and coach-whips were to be destroyed on sight; for their licking, forked tongues were "stingers" and dripped venom. If you were bitten by any snake your hope was first to drink all the raw whisky you could get hold of. Or if, within ten minutes after being bitten,

you clamped upon the wound the still quivering halves of a young chicken which, while alive, had been split open with a hatchet or a knife, there yet was a chance for you. Lacking either of these cures or both of them, you must expire in torment. The bitten part would swell enormously; the poison spreading and magnifying in your blood would rack you with hideous pains; then swiftly it would reach your heart and you were gone.

Every sort of snake was tricky and guileful but the moccasin of the low grounds the most so of all. Kill a moccasin and spare its mate, and the mate would track you for miles, set on vengeance. It was the habit of the moccasin when meat was scarce to lie beneath the yonkerpads —pond lilies, a Northerner would call them— with its head shoved up among the broad green leaves and its mouth stretched wide and gaping, a living lure for such luckless birds and bees as mistook the snare of the parted jaws with their white linings for a half-opened lily bud.

It was in accord with a quite natural law that the moccasin should be singled out for these special calumnies. Of the four venomous snakes of Temperate North America he is the least personable in looks and behavior. He lacks the grace of his upland cousin, the copperhead, and he lacks the chivalry of his more distant kinsman, the rattler, which gives the enemy due warning before he strikes. He has

none of the slimness of form nor patterned beauty of that streak of fanged lightning which lives in the palmetto scrubs, the coral snake. He is mournfully colored and miserably shaped. The tones of dull creek mud and of stale creek slime mingle in his scrofulous mottlings. There is leprosy in the pale foxings of his lips, and dropsy in his bloat amidships. Take him in the dead of summer when, with stored-up meanness his belly is monstrous and heavy, and see him then making loopy S's in the torpid water, as he swims, or stretched out, baking himself on the blistered creek-bed and, with his skinny neck and stumpy, inadequate tail joined to that lumpy body, he'll suggest to you a sort of legless malignant lizard rather than a true snake. Only in the eyes of the taxidermist does he redeem himself for these manifold shortcomings. Being without bright tints to fade in the mounting, his stuffed skin needs no special varnishing to make it seem authentic. It is a poor compliment, perhaps, but his only one. Of all other counts and for all other qualities he is copiously defamed and folks generally are prone to believe the worst of him.

Japhet Morner did for one. For him, swamp-water athrive with typhoid germs, or rancid corn pones in which the active seeds of pelagra lived, or mosquitoes carrying malaria and ague in their bills, conveyed no sense of peril. The mosquitoes were to be endured, the water was to be drunk. And biliousness was the com-

mon lot of man, anyway. At least, in this neck of the woods it was. But snakes, now, were different; any snake and all snakes whatsoever. He accepted for truth all the hard things that might be said of a snake. Certain other things he likewise believed, namely, that first, his nearest neighbor, Snake Doctor, held unwholesome communion with the cotton-mouths; that second, Snake Doctor had a treasure in money hid away in his shack—on this point he was very sure; and that third, the same Snake Doctor was entirely too fond of his, Japhet's wife, Kizzie, and she of him.

So it would appear he had a triplet of reasons for holding the other in disfavor—envy of him for his stored wealth, a gnawing suspicion from seeing in him a potential philanderer, and finally, that emotion of fearsome distrust bred out of stupidity and credulity, which his kind were likely to have for any fellow-man fashioned in different likeness from the run of them. That the shambling, soft-brained Snake Doctor was as sexless as a dirt-clod would have been apparent to any straight-seeing observer; and it should have been as plainly visible even to this husband of hers that Kizzie Morner was a good woman and an honest one. But the jaundiced eye sees everything as yellow, and yellow is the color for jealousy, too, and it suited Japhet Morner's mood to brew jealousy in his mind. Brewing it steadily there was strengthening his will for the putting-through

of a private project which for a long time he had been conning over in his thoughts. The issue came to a head on a certain day.

It was a day in that drear season of the year when the birds have quit singing in the daytime and the locusts have started. Summer had sagged as though from the sheer exhaustion of its own wasted fervor. The lowland woods had lost that poisonous green sprightliness which came to them in early April and lasted until the August hot spell set in. Even the weeds, which in the bottoms grew rank and high and close-set, almost as canes in a canebrake, were wilted and weary-looking. The sun had come up that morning behind clouds. In the middle of the forenoon the clouds still banked together to hide the heavens but the heat seemed intensified, and pressed the unstirring air close down to the burnt earth. As Japhet Morner came out of the timber into the scorched clearing behind his house the sweat dripped from him and he panted in the close still humidity. His two dogs trailed him, their tongues lolling. One of them brushed against his leg. He hauled off and fetched the dog a sound kick in the ribs. He was not in a happy humor.

At sunup, after a breakfast of cold scraps left from the night before, he had gone down to Cashier Creek to get a bait of sunfish. If he were lucky he might catch a catfish for his string. He had no luck, though. The creek

was shrunken; it was lower than he ever remembered seeing it. The drought had sucked up its strength. At the shallows it was no more than a thin sluggish trickle. In deeper places there scarcely was current enough to keep twigs and dropped leaves moving on the unrippled coffee-colored surface. Along the edges, wide bare strips of the stream's customary bottom showed. Cooked hard and dry by the sun, the mud here was cracked into irregular squares and parallelograms—the dividing seams always running at rough right angles—and the corners of each crusted segment had crinkled up so that the general effect suggested a bad job of flagged pavement, scamped in the original contract and now warping apart at all joints. Beyond, right and left, rose sharply the walls of the stream. Cashier Creek was a creek without a valley to it. There was no dip in the ground toward it. The flats came right up to its verges, and then, without warning, the earth was shorn straight away to the scoured-out bed, so that its course ran in what resembled an artificial cutting. In this part of the country many creeks are like that—with abrupt sides that sheer down steep and smooth except where water erosion has scored and runneled the soft earth. Only here and there some glacier has left its autograph in a scour of red gravel to remind parched mankind that once upon a time there was an Age of Ice in the world.

Japhet fished and fished and was rewarded with no nibbles whatsoever; seemingly, even the littlest fishes were too languid to bite at worms he dangled for them in likely spots. He came down stream to the Big Hole, so called, where, an eighth of a mile up from Snake Doctor's shanty, the creek widened to thrice its usual breadth. Here a tight wedge of driftwood blocked the waters. Each successive freshet had added flotsam to the rude dam, lost cross-ties, uprooted trees, corn stalks, chips, fence-rails, sticks. Ordinarily this lesser riffle would cover the pool so thickly that, with the top dressing of cream-colored foam, there was created the simulation of a solid footing; a stranger might have been pardoned for believing he could walk across and keep dry-shod. But now all here was clear of gently eddying debris. The consumed stream, instead of slapping against the spanning driftage, ran under it with an oozy, guzzling sound. Directly in the middle there was a busy little whirlpool, funneling downward.

On one of the lowermost of the bared logs a cotton-mouth was twisted up, taking his ease in the congenial fever-warmth. He was a big fat one—fully two feet long and as thick through his girth as a boy's arm. From the bank edge above, Japhet saw him and looked about for something to throw at him. In a section where gravel is rare and all rock formations are buried a hundred feet down under

the silt the verb "to stone" neither is used nor known. Your weapon invariably is a "chunk" and with it—a hard clod or a lump of wood or whatever it is—you "chunk" away at your target.

The man found a sizable missile, a heavy, half-rotted sycamore bough, and he snapped it off to suitable length and flung it, twirling, at the motionless mark. His aim was good. The stricken snake flapped out of coil and dragged its broken loops from sight into an interlacing of naked limbs on the farther side of its log. The stick bounced hard and splashed in the pool. Japhet saw how that it swirled around and around and then, briskly, was sucked beneath the jam. With a quickened curiosity he moved downstream a rod or two and waited. Although the jam was now, so to speak, a suspension bridge, and in places stood inches clear of the water, the stick did not emerge into view below it. No drift showed there, either; the creek for a space flowed clear of rubbish. Evidently, objects caught in that small whirlpool above were carried in and under to lodge and be held fast by some submerged trapwork of soaked and sunken limbs. Probably they would stay there for months, perhaps stay there always. Turning the matter of the phenomenon over in his mind, he flung away his bait can, spun his fishing cane so that the line wrapped around it, and made off through the woods for his home, nearly a mile away. The two dogs

racked along at his heels. Coming out of the woods one of them made the mistake of nudging him.

Having disciplined the scrooging dog with his boot toe he slouched out into the six-acre "dead'nin'." His puny patch of corn, for lack of the hoe, was smothering in weeds. In bare spots where the thin soil was washed so close down to the underlying clay-pan that here not even weeds would sprout, the crawfish had pushed up their conical watchtowers of dried mud. Tall ash boles, girdled and dead, threw foreshortened shadows across the clearing—shadows such as gallows trees might cast. His house, of two rooms and built of unpainted up-and-down planking, squatted in the inadequate shade of a stunted hackberry tree. A well was at one corner; a slim pole with a cross-piece, bearing pendent gourds for the martins to nest in, poked above the roof of curled gray shingles. Martins were harbored because they kept the mosquitoes down. There was no flower bed, no truck patch, no fencing. Across the open space, with the heat waves dancing before him, the outlines of the house seemed to waver and twist like an object seen through smoke. It stood a foot from the earth, on log props. Because of seepage there were no cellars in this neighborhood. The inevitable dogs lived under the houses and bred their fleas there, and the hogs, too, if so be a house owner had any hogs.

It was nearly noon now. His wife, barefooted and in a skimpy blue frock open at the throat, was cooking the midday meal, the principal meal of the three. He came up to the door and she, looking up from the cook stove where she was turning the strips of sizzling meat in the skillet, saw the look on his face. Her mouth twitched apprehensively. By the signs she knew when he was in one of his tantrums.

"Ketch anything, Jafe?" she asked, nervously.

"Ketch anything this weather? —whut'd you expect I'd ketch?" From his voice it might be figured that, vicariously, he blamed her for the failure of the expedition.

He hunkered down on the doorstep, his fishing pole still in his hands, and shook his head to free it of the drops which trickled over his face and into his eyes.

"That pore old Mist' Rives come by here a spell ago, mighty nigh shook to pieces with a chill," she said, after a bit.

"Oh, he come by, did he?" His tone, purposely, was disarming. "Well, did he come in?"

"Jes' fur a minute."

"Jes' fur a minute, heh? And whut did he want?"

"He wanted could I give him somethin' fur his ailmint. He jes' about could drag one sorry foot before the other—barely could make it up here frum his place. I reckon he must be

down in bed with the fever by now; I could tell by the t'ech it wuz risin' in him when he left here and started back home ag'in. It'll be mighty pitiful, him down flat of his back and nobody there to do nothin' fur his comfort. I give him a dost out of our Butler's Ager Drops. I would a-give him a little smidgin' of licker only—only—" She left the sentence unfinished. "That pore shackly Mist' Rives, he—— *Oh*, please don't, Jafe!"

Turning, he had cut viciously at her with the long cane. She shrank back as it whipped through the air, and took the lashing stroke on her forearm, thrown up to fend off the blow.

"Mist' Rives! Mist' Rives!" He mimicked her, furiously. "How many times I got to tell you that there old hoodoo's name is Snake Doctor? Him that'd skin a louse fur its hide and taller and you callin' him 'Mist' Rives'! You'll be callin' him 'Honey' and 'Sugar' next without I learn you better. Pet names, huh? Well, I aim to learn you."

She flinched at the threat, rubbing the welt on her skin; but he made no effort to strike her again. He sat glowering, saying nothing at all as she made hurry to dish up the food and put it before him; she hoped the weight of victuals in his stomach might dull the edge of his temper. For her part, she had the wisdom to keep silent, too. She ate on her feet, serving him between bites and sups, as was the rule in this household.

After dinner he stretched himself on the floor of the inner room. But he did not sleep. He was busy with his thoughts. One thing he had seen that day, and another thing he had heard —he was adding them together, as the first sum in a squalid equation. She drew a cane-bottom chair outdoors and sat under the hackberry tree, fanning herself, and "dipping" snuff with a peach-twig which she scoured back and forth on her gums. After a little while she was driven into the kitchen. It began to rain in sharp violent showers. The rain made the house inside no cooler; merely changed it from a bake-oven to a steam-box.

It was getting along toward four o'clock before Japhet emerged from the front room. He drew on his heavy knee-length boots, which he had removed before lying down, and laced them up. This done, he spoke to her for the first time since noon.

"Where's that there vi'l of licker?" he said. "Fetch it here to me."

They kept a small store of whisky by them—all in that district did the same—for chills and possible snake bites. She brought him a pint flask nearly full and he shoved it into his hip pocket. Then immediately, as though moved by a fresh idea, he hauled it out again and put it down on the kitchen table.

"Come to think about it," he said, "I won't be needin' to tote no sperrits along with me where I'm goin'. Cotton-mouths is all down in

the slashes or else along the creek, and where I'll be all this evenin' is up on Bailey's Ridge on the high ground."

He was not given to favoring her with explanations of his motives or accounts of his movements. This departure from fixed habit emboldened his wife to put a question.

"Fixin' to go shootin', Jafe?" she asked, timidly.

"I aim to gun me a mess of young squirrels 'twixt now and dusktime. I heard 'em barkin' all 'round me this mornin'. Ef they're that plenty in the low ground they'll be out thicker'n hops after the mulberries and the young hick'ry nuts up Bailey's Ridge." . .

He took up his single-shot rifle where it stood in a corner, and from an opened box on a shelf scooped a handful of brass shells. Then he went outside and tied up both his dogs. One was a hound, good for hunting rabbits. It was proper that he should be left behind. But the smaller dog, a black mongrel, was a trained squirrel dog. As his wife stood in the doorway, Japhet read the dumb curiosity which her face expressed.

"With the leaves ez thick ez the way they air, still huntin' is best this time o' year," he explained. "So I won't be needin' Gyp. Don't let neither one of 'em gnaw hisself loose and follow after me. Set me up a snack of cold supper on a shelf. Likely I won't git back till it's plum' night-time—gunnin' fur them squir-

rels is best jes' before dark, and I'll be away off yonder at the fur end of the Ridge, three miles frum here, when I git ready to start back. 'Tain't ez ef I wuz rangin' in the low ground."

He turned north through the struggling corn rows and in a minute was gone from her sight into the dripping woods. He kept on going north for nearly a mile until he came to where a wild red mulberry tree stood in a small natural opening. Some of the overripe fruit, blackened and shrivelled, still clung to the boughs; and where there are mulberries in the summer woods, there squirrels almost certainly will likewise be. Very neatly he shot two young grays through their heads. Japhet was a master marksman. It was his one gentlemanly accomplishment. In all other regards he was just plain poor white trash, as one of his negro neighbors would have phrased it—behind Japhet's back. But unsuspected by any who knew him, he had a quality of mind which is denied many of his class—an imagination. It was in excellent working order this day. He now was proving that it was.

He tied the brained squirrels together and swung them, tails downward, over a strap of his suspenders. If needed, they were to be evidence in his behalf—part of his alibi. Next he sat down under a tree awhile with his pipe going, partly for solace and partly to keep away the midges and gnats and the ever present plague of mosquitoes. He sat out two

brisk showers with the intervals between them. Then, getting up he set off, keeping always to the deeper woodlands, in a swing which would bring him down Bailey's Branch, now wasted to a succession of mere puddles, and along the skirts of Little Cypress Slash to the sunken flats edging Cashier Creek. The arc of his swing was wide. It took him all of two hours, traveling carefully and without haste through the steamy coverts, to reach the point he aimed for.

He came to halt, cautiously and well sheltered, behind the farthermost fringes of a little jungle of haw bushes where the diminishing woods frayed out in a sort of green promontory fifty yards or so back of Snake Doctor's cabin. This was his chosen destination, so here he squatted himself down in a nest of sodden leaves and grass to wait. It had begun to shower again, good and hard. He was drenched. No matter, though; he figured he would not have so very long to wait. As it turned out he didn't.

There was no house dog to come nosing him out and barking an alarm. That Snake Doctor owned no dog would have marked him, in this part of the land, as a person totally different from his fellows, even had there been lacking other points of variance. What Snake Doctor did own was a mare, or the ruins of one. A wag at the county seat had said once Ole Snake Doctor's nag put him in mind, every time he saw her, of a string band; she had xylophone

ribs and a fiddle-shaped head and legs like bass drum sticks. She was housed in a log crib a few rods behind the only slightly larger log cabin of her owner. Where he stooped in his point of woods, Japhet could hear her stirring restlessly in her stall. He might have seen her through the cracks between the logs of her shelter except for a brush fence which bounded the small weed-grown clearing.

His plan was simple enough and yet, as he saw it, fault-proof. Feeding time was at hand; soon Snake Doctor, ailing though he was, surely would be coming out from his cabin to bait the old rack-of-bones. Japhet counted on this. He'd get him then, first pop. He'd teach him what the costs were of colleaguing with another man's lawful wedded wife, and the lesson would be the death of him. At a half crouch in his ambush, Japhet told himself that his motive was jealousy; that he was here as a white man and an injured husband for the satisfaction of his personal honor and in the defense of his threatened thresholds. By a conscious effort of his will he kept in the background of his mind the other purpose that had brought him on this errand. In such moments as he let his thoughts dwell on it he strove to regard it as a side-issue, a thing incidental to the main intent. It had to do with money—with Snake Doctor's hoarded money.

The next step after the principal act would be to dispose of the body. That should be

easy. He could carry the meager frame over his shoulder for a mile, if needs be. And he wouldn't have to carry it for a mile either—only as far as the Big Hole; then lower the burden into the water and let it slip in under the log jam. The chunk he had killed the moccasin with had stayed under there; skinny old Snake Doctor would stay too. This done, he would come back here to the cabin and hunt out the hidden treasure. He figured it shouldn't take him a great while to find it; he already had a sort of notion as to its whereabouts, a strong clew to start on. Having found it he would circle back up through the woods, reentering his field from the upper or northern side, with two squirrels flapping his flank for proof that he had been hunting on Bailey's Ridge. Suspicion never could touch him. Why should it?

He counted on the rain which was now falling to wipe out his tracks in Snake Doctor's horse lot. Anyhow, it probably would be days or weeks before any one missed the hermit and made search for him; in that time the tracks would have vanished, rain or no. It was greatly in his favor that when Snake Doctor was away from home, or supposed to be, folks religiously refrained from setting foot on the premises. They mightily feared the cotton-mouths with which the recluse was reputed to consort. There was even a story that Snake Doctor kept for a watchman in his house the granddaddy

of all created cotton-mouths and set this monster on guard when he stirred abroad. So he needed no locks on his doors nor bar for his single window, the legend amply protecting his belongings in his absences.

Ten minutes passed, fifteen, and Japhet was up on his knees, his rifle at poise, his eyes watching through the tops of the weeds which fringed the ambuscade. Something or other—something quick and furtive—stirred behind him. Startled, he turned his head, saw that the disturber was a belated catbird, and looked front again. In that brief space of time the victim had come into sight. Through the rain and the slackening daylight he could see, above the ragged top of the intervening brush fence, the white patch of Snake Doctor's loppy old straw hat and below the hat the folds of a dark coat drawn over a pair of hunched narrow shoulders as the wearer of these garments came briskly toward the stable, which meant also toward him. At this distance he couldn't miss.

Nor did he. At the shot, the figure jerked backward, then went over face forward. The killer rose upright, exultation contending with tautened nerves within him. He stole up to the fence, set a foot in the tangled brushwood with intent to climb it and then, at what he saw, froze into a poised shape of terror, his eyes bulging, his mouth opened in a square shape, and his rifle dropping from his twitching fingers.

He had just killed Snake Doctor—killed him dead with a 32-caliber slug through the head. And here on his door-sill stood Snake Doctor, whole and sound, and staring at him! And now, Snake Doctor, dead by all rights and rules, yet living, was uttering a cry and starting out of the doorway toward him.

Japhet Morner had sucked in superstitions with his mother's milk. He believed in "ha'nts" and "witch-hags" and "sperrits," believed in "conjures" and "charms" and ghosts and hoop-snakes; believed that those under the favor of infernal forces might only be killed with a bullet molded from virgin silver. And his mistake was, he had used lead out of a brass shell.

Power of motion returned to him. He threw himself backward and whirled and ran into the deeps of the darkening woods, making whimpering whining sounds like a thrashed puppy as he went.

Terror rode him into the steamy woodlands. Exhaustion, dizziness, the feeling that he must get under the shelter of a sound roof, must have the protection of four walls about him, brought Japhet Morner out again along toward midnight. The rain had ceased; the moon was trying to come forth. A short distance southeast of his place he struck a dirt road which would lead him there. Beyond the next bend he would be in sight of home.

Around the turn he saw coming toward him a joggling light—a lantern hung on a buggy or light wagon, he figured—and heard the creak of wheels turning in the muddied softness. Nameless horrors had made a fugitive of him; the fugitive instinct still possessed him. Anyway, all shocked and shaken and shivering as he was, hatless and wet and dripping with muck, it would be better for him if no prying eyes beheld his present state. He flattened down in a clump of wayside bushes to bide until the approaching traveler passed.

Moving briskly, the rig was almost opposite him when, from the other direction—the same direction he had been following—came a call:

"Hello there!—who's joggin'?" The voice seemed to spring out of the darkness.

"Whoa!—Stiddy, boy!" Whoever was driving, pulled up his horse, which had shied at the sudden hail. "Me—Davis Ware," he answered back. "That you, Tip Bailey?"

"Yep, hoofin' it out from the Junction, and tolerable tired, if anybody should ask you. What's bringin' you out this hour of night, Davis—somebody sick?"

"Sick nothin'! There's been hell poppin' in these bottoms tonight."

Behind the weed screen ten feet away the listener stiffened, his blood drumming in him. He knew the speakers, both neighbors of his, one of them a local leader. The foot passenger hurried up alongside the buggy; his face, in-

quisitive and alarmed, showed in the dim circlet of lantern light.

"What do you mean?"

"A killin'—that's whut I mean. An abominable, cold-blooded killin' ef ever there wuz one."

"God! Who's been killed?"

"I'm fixin' to tell you, man. It happened jes' shortly before dusk at ole Snake Doctor's place."

"Was it him was killed?"

"Gimme time, can't you?" This Ware was one who must tell his tale his own way or not at all. "It seems like Snake Doctor's been chillin' lately. He wuz purty bad off to-day—I mean yistiddy. And so, right after supper-time when the rain wuz lullin' a little, Mizz Kizzie Morner she footed it down frum her place to hisn', fetchin' some physic with her and a plate of hot vittles fur him. It seems like she wuzn't feared to go there. I'd 'a' been, I'll own up, but she wuzn't. Well, purty soon after she got there it seems like he tried to git up out of his bed to go feed that old crow-bait sorrel of his'n. It had started in ag'in by then, pourin' down hard and so she made him stay where he wuz. And she put on his old hat and throwed his old coat 'round her to keep off the wust of the wet, and she started out of the back door to do the feedin'. And no more'n she'd got outside in the lot than a shot come frum the aidge of the woods right over the fence and down she went with a bullet through her brains."

"God's sake! Dead?"

"No, not dead, but same ez dead. She barely wuz breathin' here not ten minutes ago when I left her house. Old Doctor Bradshaw, he's there with her now and he says it's a miracle she's lasted this long. Well, it seems like Snake Doctor jumped up at the shot and run out to see whut had happened and there she lay a'welterin'. And him,—well, he's been takin' on like all possessed ever since. I wouldn't 'a' believed he could 'a' had so much feelin' in him ef I hadn't seen him with my own eyes. It wuz him run for help, though—he did have sense enough left to do that. He found me in my tobacco patch and I dropped everything and took out for there, and a bunch of us picked her up and toted her home on a wagon bed. She's shot in the left side of the head just over the temples; the bullet went clean through and come out on the right side."

"But who did it?"

"I'm comin' to that. 'Twuz that low-flung husband of hers done it—that's who. It seems like he must 'a' followed her down to Snake Doctor's and laid in wait fur her and felled her ez she come out. Gawd knows why, onless 'twuz jes' pyure pizen meanness."

"The murderin' dog! They're certain 'twas him, then?"

"Shore ez gun's iron 'twuz him. Snake Doctor ketched a quick look at him over the fence ez he darted off. And right there they found

his rifle where he'd dropped it before he whirl't and run—fool thing fur him to do—and I seen his tracks, myself, in the soft ground, goin' and comin' and where he must 'a' stood when he fired. I seen 'em by lantern light after I got there—and fully half a dozen others seen 'em too. There's a long red streak on her arm where he must 'a' been whuppin' her sometime durin' the day."

"Hangin's a sight too good! Did they catch him?"

"No, but they will. Some thinks he's made fur the slashes and hid out there—his tracks led off that way. There'll be a line of men throwed all the way 'round Little Cypress before sunup. They're organizin' the posse at the Morner place."

"Sheriff got there yet?"

"No, but he's due by daylight or sooner. They telephoned in from Gallup's Mills to him and he's already started with his pack of dogs. The trail ought to lay good, ground bein' damp the way it is. Ole Snake Doctor he's carryin' on and ravin' 'round, sayin' the Lord's goin' to strike the murderer down in his tracks. But I'm puttin' my main dependence on them bloodhounds—on them, first, and then mebbe on a good stout plow line and the limb of a tree. Oh, they'll ketch him, and when they do, I 'low to be there. I'm jes' puttin' out fur my place to roust out my oldest boy and fetch him back with me. There's a good-size crowd mus-

tered already but we'll need every able-bodied hand we can git."

"Don't let me hold you up any longer, then," said the pedestrian, a deadly grimness in his tone. "I'm ready now—got a pistol here in my hip pocket. That poor thing! She always was a good-hearted, hard-workin' woman and mightily put-upon. As for Jafe Morner—well, if I should be so lucky as to be the one to jump him out of the sticks, I'm goin' shoot first and ask questions afterwards. I'll be waitin' there at Morner's when you get back, Davis."

He broke into a half-run.

In the patchy moonlight which sifted through the shredding rain-clouds, Snake Doctor's house made a black square against the lesser blackness of its background. To it, panting in his haste, came the assassin, running. He feared the place—to the bottom of his desperate soul he feared it—but a fear yet greater was driving him hither. Previously it has been stated that this man had a powerful imagination. To a literate person it might have been a gift. To him, in this emergency, it was a curse. It set his already sore and smitten nerves on end; still, it honed his wits to a sharper edge.

What he overheard back there on the dirt road had remodeled his formless flight into a shaped intent. Now he had to deal, not with phantoms and daunting apparitions, but with tangible dangers; dangers not less frightful than

those others perhaps, but to be coped with—if his luck held—and outwitted by physical devices. There was no remorse in him. After all he was fairly well suited by the outcome of his mistake; getting safely away was what concerned him. In his present plight, weaponless, without a cent in his pocket, with the countryside rousing to hunt him, escape was out of prospect. But with money to buy his way along he'd have a good chance. Let the Sheriff come on with his dogs, then, let the mob form, with their talk of a rope and cold lead! Given any sort of break he'd best them. He would strike through the deep timber for the river; in six hours of steady traveling he could make it. At the river he would hire a shanty-boater to ferry him across to the Arkansas side; in some town over there buy clothes and get his hair cut; then catch a train and travel as far west or as far south as the steam-cars would take him. And it was Snake Doctor's cash that would buy the way for him! Getting this money had been in the angles of his original plan; a seemingly unearthly intervention had diverted him from it. Now he was returning to it, with a tremendous motive, self-preservation, urging him to speed. He had little time, though.

Mighty little. He knew the interior arrangements of Snake Doctor's one room—the pallet in this corner, the fireplace in that, the chair and the table drawn out on the sagging floor. In the one spying visit he ever had paid Snake

Doctor two weeks before when this shooting scheme first formed in his mind, he had noted these things in detail. He had marked also the very spot where he was certain the place of concealment for the money was. All through his stay, Snake Doctor, tremulous and plainly apprehensive, had maneuvered to keep between the unbidden, unwelcome caller and the corner where the comforters and blankets were placed. Also, the recluse's eyes had helped to betray him; time and time again they had turned nervously to the wall just beyond and above the bedding, a point, say, five or six feet above it. Just about there, probably in a concealed gap between or behind the logs, the loot surely must be.

He thrust through the planked door, sagging on its leather hinges, and crossed directly to the fireplace. There was no fire in it, but, on stooping and fumbling with his hands, he found chips there ready to be kindled, and under the chips scraps of paper—good! He needed a light of sorts to search by. He had matches in his pocket, corked in a bottle, water-tight. He got them out as quickly as his shaking fingers would let him. There were only four of them. One after another he struck them, applying their points of flame to the paper. But the paper was damp from rain coming down the mud chimney, and no fire caught until the fourth and last match had been struck. Then it merely flickered; it ran slowly along the

edge of the charring paper, smoking and threatening to go out.

Alright, then, let it go out, if it wanted to. He could see in the dark as well as the next one, and had hands to feel with. He made for the corner diagonally across the cabin and ran his hands swiftly along the exposed upper surface of a certain log, probing for any deep depressions in the rotted bark adhering to it, nicking the dried clay mortar with his nails. He tried that log without result, started on the log above it—and sucked in his breath as loose scraps of bark fell away at his touch from where they covered a niche in the joining. The cavity thus exposed was roughly circular in shape, the diameter about of a man's arm; he could tell that by fingering its edges. This must be the hole. Greedily he thrust his right hand in. It touched something—something slick and round and firm and smooth—and there came a quick darting sting as pointed things, sharp and keen, jabbed his thumb, tearing the skin as he jerked his hand out.

In that same breath the feeble flame in the fireplace caught well and flared up, its blaze filling the cabin with a wavery, unreliable radiance. Japhet Morner, flinging his hand up before his face, saw by that red brightness that on the inner side of his thumb were two tiny torn punctures, half an inch apart, from which drops of blood had started; and then, on beyond, two feet away, at the level of his stricken

eyes he saw the forepart of a thick snake, its hideous dull-marked head lifted and thrust back just within the round of the orifice, its mouth wide open, with the cottony linings revealed, its neck taut and curved as though ready to strike again.

He gave a strangled slobbering howl and leaped to the other side of the room, sobbing, gasping, uttering fragments of wordless sound. The blood jumped and spurted from his flirted thumb to prove the wounds though minute were deep.

He must have whisky to drink or the cloven, hot carcass of a freshly-killed chicken to bind fast to the bite, or he was done for. At his house half a mile away was whisky and there were chickens asleep on their roost. He might make it. He whirled about, then recoiled as though a hard blow had stopped him. He couldn't go where men were assembling, ready and anxious to stretch his neck for him.

Now then, his brain told him that, already and thus soon, quick pangs were leaping down his thumb, through his hand, flaming along his wrist and up his arm. The poison must be racing in his veins, mounting and growing, as he had heard it would. He had a feeling that his hand was swelling, making the skin tighter and tighter. There was no help, and even did help come now it would come too late. He howled and dropped and rolled on the floor, his head knocking against the rough boards.

Up in the creviced wall the forward length of the snake showed, its head still guardingly reared on its slim neck, its lidless pale eyes, like twin crumbs of blurred glass, aglow in the shifting firelight.

He got upon his feet, and a terrific pain struck at his heart, squeezing and wringing it. His throat closed and he choked. A second pain twisted his heart.

With a drunken leap he cleared the sill of the rear doorway, ran in a wavering course a few strides out across the horse lot and then, as his knees gave way under him, he pitched forward on his face, his lolled mouth full of weeds and muddy grass stems. The drumming fingers of his outstretched right hand almost touched a reddish-black smear where the earth was trampled and the grass flattened down.

"Good reddance, by Gravy! I'd call it that; wouldn't you, Doc?"

The speaker was driving Dr. Bradshaw back to his home near Gallup's Mills. The other raised his head wearily. He had been up all night and he was an old man. The rocking motion of the buggy was soothing to him, even though the newly-risen sun did put its slanted rays right into his eyes.

"Well," he said, "I'd not have wished the death he died on any man, no matter what he'd done to deserve it. Yet I reckon there was a sort of rough justice in it, too. Anyway,

we've been saved a lynching or else a regular hanging. And one would have been a scandal on the county and the other an expense to the tax-payers. Maybe you have got the right idea about it, Jim Meloan.

"I'm looking at it more from the professional point of view. I've had two strange experiences this past night, Jim. I've seen an undernourished sickly woman, after being shot through the brain, linger for nearly seven hours before she died, and I've examined the body of a man who'd been killed by a snake bite—killed good and quick, too, judging by the evidences."

"Well, Doc, ain't that the way a cotton-mouth always does kill a man—sudden like?" asked Meloan. "I've always heared tell——"

"Never mind what you've heard," said the old doctor; he was cross because he was sleepy. "I'm going by the facts, not by fairy-tales. I was born and raised down here and I've been practicing medicine in this county for going on forty-six years and as a country doctor I ought to know something about these things if anybody does. And I tell you that in all my life I've never known of but two or three people actually being bitten by water moccasins, and until this morning I never had personal knowledge of anybody at all dying from the bite of any kind of snake. Horses?—well, yes. Dogs?—maybe so. But not a human being until now.

"Still, the proof is clear enough in this case.

I think I'll have to write a paper about it for the next meeting of the State Medical Society. The places where the fangs nipped him were right there in the ball of his thumb—two bloody deep little scratches, side by side. And then there was that look on his face—*ugh!* I'm fairly hardened but I'm not going to forget Jafe Morner's face in a hurry. He died quick, I'd say offhand, but he died hard, too; I'll swear to that part of it. Well, he was the kind who likely would flicker out pretty brisk under certain circumstances. Ever notice the color of his skin and those heavy pouches under his eyes? Bad whisky and bad food and swamp fevers didn't put those signs on him. The late Japhet had a rotten bad heart, Jimmy."

"He shorely did," agreed Meloan fervently. "Yistiddy proved that."

"I don't mean exactly in that sense," explained the physician. "I mean he had an organic weakness. Curious thing, though, there was no swelling 'round the wounds nor any swelling in his hand or arm; no noticeable blotching of the skin, either. And yet, if there's anything in the accepted theories of the toxic effects of a snake's bite, those conditions should have been marked. Oh, I'll have quite a paper to read before the Society!"

"Mebbe the swellin' had done went down before you got to him?" suggested the morbidly interested farmer.

"No, he couldn't have been dead more than

a short while when they went down there to set the dogs on the trail and found him; Sherriff Gill tells me he was still warm. And I was there not ten minutes after that. It's a mighty unusual case—several features about it that puzzles me. F'rinstance, now what about the snake that gashed him? Which-a-way did it come from beforehand and where did it head for afterwards? I didn't see any snake tracks in the ground close to where he was laying—I looked for 'em, too. Still, the lot was pretty well trompled. Now, that poor forlorn old creature that you people in this neighborhood call Snake Doctor, he's got his own pet theory about it. He keeps on saying it was the Vengeance of the Lord falling upon a red-handed murderer. He thinks the fellow was drawn back to the seat of his crime—well, that might be so; I've heard of such things before—and that the Divine Wrath lit on him. But if I was him I'd be poking under the stable or the cabin for a whopping big snake.

"He tells me, though—and he ought to be an authority on the subject if anybody is—he tells me that a water moccasin never travels many yards away from the water and that night-times they always den up somewhere, being cold-blooded creatures that love the sunshine. And on top of that he swears to me that there never have been any moccasins close about his diggin's unless he'd brought 'em there dead or else as prisoners in a sack."

"Why, looky here, Doc," broke in Meloan; "he lied to you, then. There's always been a sayin' 'round here that Snake Doctor kept a hugeous big cotton-mouth right with him in his house all the time!"

"Yes, that's true. I saw it, myself, not an hour ago," said the doctor, smiling a little. "I reckon the old fellow's smarter than some folks give him credit for being. He took me in his shack and showed it to me."

"But I thought you jes' now said that——"

"Wait till I finish. He took me in and showed it to me, just as I'm telling you. But it was deader than Hector. It was a stuffed snake—with glass eyes and all. It seems a professional taxidermist who was up here from Memphis some years ago mounted it for our eccentric friend. Well, I'll tell the world he made a good job of it. Life-like?—you bet you! See it in a poor light and you'd almost be ready to swear you saw it move its head. I wouldn't have the thing 'round me for any amount of cash. But it seems this old fellow had a purpose in keeping it.

"That point came out in a sort of a peculiar way, too. It's been common gossip, I understand, that Snake Doctor had a store of money laid by. No doubt you've heard exaggerated stories about the size of his wad; but I'm prepared to tell you it wasn't much—just under a hundred dollars, all told. After he'd ca'mmed down he told me he didn't crave to keep it

any more. He said he wanted it spent, paying for a proper funeral for that poor woman—said she was the only friend he'd had in the world; the only one that ever gave him a kind look or a kind word. So he asked me and Tip Bailey to take charge of it and then he took us in his shanty and got it out from the secret place where he'd kept it hid. It was tucked down in behind a break in the chinking between two of the side logs. And—listen to this, Jim—right in front of it, just back inside the mouth of the opening, he'd set that stuffed cotton-mouth of his, figuring that the bare sight of it, with its neck all bent like as if it was fixing to lunge and its jaws wide open, would kind of discourage anybody who might take a notion to start exploring in there.

"And, then for a further precaution—oh, he's got plenty of sense in his way—he'd gone and lined the inside of the hole all 'round the edges and half-way down to the bottom with coils of barbed wire, with the points sticking up every which way. Anybody who rammed his hand in there suddenly would certainly get gaffed. Not that anybody would, who'd seen the snake first."

The old doctor yawned heavily. "Purty smart little notion, I'd call it."

CHAPTER II

ONE BLOCK FROM FIFTH AVENUE

WHIPPOORWILLVILLE is one of those places where the train stops twenty minutes for dinner and the passengers who take a chance have from ten to fifteen minutes to spare, dependent on how game they are. This gives them a chance to see the business district. They can see it in five minutes, or four, if they hurry, which allows ample time for them to get back on board and start wondering what the delay is all about before the locomotive comes to and goes on about its business.

To give you a further idea: No set of souvenir postcards showing views in and around Whippoorwillville has yet been printed; and the popular excitement throughout the country caused by the Eskimo pie had practically abated nearly everywhere else in the South-Central states before it even reached here.

The town never had a boom. Its population increases very slowly and only because, as the

vital statistics covering any healthful community will show, there are more births than there are deaths. Rarely does anything new go up, but occasionally something old falls down. In fact, Whippoorwillville is what you would call a finished town. Enlarging the fact, you might say it has been finished since the Civil War. The biggest thing that ever happened there was a clash between Union home guards and Confederate partisan rangers, raiding in for horses and recruits. This happened the fall after Fort Sumter was fired on, but the older citizens speak of it as though it had occurred within these past few months. But the biggest thing of recent years was when Letty Ember went to New York to prosecute her art studies in that great center of culture and artistic endeavor.

Letty Ember was Whippoorwillville's acknowledged child of genius. She was its only such, so naturally her going away made talk beforehand and left a void afterward. Herself, she could not remember when the urge of her gift first came to her. It was of record in the family that almost from her cradle days on she had been, as the word is, "different." While other little girls were playing Lady-come-to-see and cutting out paper dolls she drew pictures of things and painted them with water colors. A paint box containing an assortment of pale lozenge-looking slabs and some very limber camel's hair brushes with quills for

handles and two little mixing dishes like large white china buttons with the thread holes left out of them, was at six her most treasured possession. At school on Friday afternoons she was the one who was sent to the blackboard to write out mottoes and surround them with scrolls in red and white chalks. In a somewhat later period she won first prize at the Denton County Fair "for the best strictly original work of art executed by a resident of the county." Her offering was a study in oils—she had progressed by now to the stronger and more enduring medium—a fruit piece showing apricots, pears, grapes and a slice of an exceedingly ripe watermelon grouped on a marble slab. She was sixteen then and her father was postmaster under the second Wilson administration and they lived in one of the largest houses in town; the one with the two wooden cupolas on it and a railing around the roof, it being the same house which an architect from Boston, passing through on his way to Kansas City and seeing it from the car window, had said must certainly be the real Crime of 'Seventy-three.

When this honor came to Letty Ember, bestirring her ambition for achievements yet higher, she absolutely was self-taught; had never had a lesson. Her father was forever saying that one of these days he was going to send Letty off somewhere to study under a regular professional painter. But he never got

round to it. There were several things he never got quite round to—taking out more life insurance, for one thing, and cleaning the dead stock out of his drug store and putting in a soda fountain and paying off his notes in the Dentondale bank. Death caught up with him while he had all of these projects still vaguely in mind. Letty was just past twenty when diabetes overtook the loiterer.

Meanwhile, those four years between her sixteenth birthday and her twentieth had not been wasted. The walls of the Ember home attested her industry and her versatility. For the most part her canvases, inclosed in scrolled and shiny frames, were copies of what might be called standard subjects—Spearing Salmon on the Columbia River, the Monarch of the Glen, Our Darlings, the Grand Canal (Venice) at Sunset, Pompeiian Flower Girl, Kittens at Play, Pharoah's Chariot Horses.

She was that bad!

She was worse than that. She had no part of talent in her, but only a laborious knack for laborious imitation. Had there been in her a single smoldering tiny spark of the fire called inspiration she would somehow have guessed a way through her ignorance and isolation, through her lack of craftsmanship even, to the rights of things. All about her were beauties that cried aloud in their loneliness for an artist to catch them and hold them in his webs of color—the neighborly foothills in wintertimes

under snow; the jade-green river bottoms in the spring; the woods in the fall, with the hickories yellowing up and the ash purpling and the sour-gum dripping leaves like drops of blood where it had been bitten in Jack Frost's first attack; bits of dusty roadside of the summer, when the wilted mullein lolled out its furred tongues to show how poorly it stood the heat, and the "nigger-heads" brocaded the shoulders of the turnpike with golden epaulettes; darky types and town characters and awkwardly picturesque country folks; faces, shapes, figures; shadows and lights and moods —on every side, tendering themselves to her in a spendthrift prodigality. But she could not see them; the eyes of her soul were blinded to their wealth and their variety. Besides, there was nobody to tell her. So she went on desecrating ells of good cloth-weave with blobs of misused pigments. And Whippoorwillville's commonplace judgment held her as one favored beyond the ordinary daughters of ordinary men.

She went on so and thus until her father forevermore put aside all earthly consideration of those unstarted plans of his. Her mother already was dead. She was the mistress of her own acts thenceforward and the estate which had been left by the lately deceased was hers now to do with as she might devise. It was not much of an estate. When the funeral had been paid for and the just debts settled there was put into her hands a total amounting to

slightly less than eleven hundred dollars. For the carrying out of her purpose she figured, though, it would be enough—if she stinted and stretched her pennies. To be sure there was the heavy item of her consolidated entrance fees and her student dues for the first quarter; these would necessitate a seriously large outlay at the very beginning. But with her native abilities and her willingness to work hard she should go ahead fast and go ahead far. For any immediate privations she would be bountifully repaid in a few months, or in a year or two, at most, when there came to her recognition, honors, repute. You must excuse her for her vanity. For so far back as her memory ran she had been fed on the honest praise and honest loyalty of a community where local pride made up for many things lacking.

Naturally, Whippoorwillville, considered as a whole, approved of her decision. Eddie Sackett did not, it is true; but then, Eddie Sackett scarcely counted, he being as one against many. For his part, he selfishly desired that Letty should bide where she was and keep on being engaged to him. He wrote the Whippoorwillville Notes for the *Dentondale Weekly Sun-Independent*, which paid him six dollars a week, and he made fifteen dollars a week more as depot agent. He had prospects of a raise in salary; the railroad had shown signs of being not unmindful of faithful service and painstaking attention to details. On the enhanced

income, he figured, two might live almost as cheaply as one. Married to him, Letty could go on with her painting; by his word of honor he pledged himself to it.

But she had read somewhere that domestic life was crippling, nearly always, to a successful artistic career, a clog on the winged foot of genius. She had visions of herself in a noble high studio fronting canvases of great price. With this vision were interwoven other delectable pictures in which she invariably was the main and central figure—the pet of the Four Hundred, accepting commissions from distinguished and worshipful patrons; taking medals at the Academy; cooking chafing dish suppers in a vastly becoming smock for guests recruited from the aristocracy of Bohemia; queening it at artists' revels.

This conglomerate vision came swiftly between her and the present sight of Eddie's hurt, grieving face; his counter-arguments were lost in the rolling of great drums. She told him her chosen work must come first; to it she must sacrifice all else—or at least for the next few years she must. She owed it to herself; she owed it to her art. For art's sake she already had decided to alter the spelling of her name. As Letitia she had been christened, Letty she had been called, but Leatrice she would hereafter be, both to her friends and to the general public. It was a name she had found in a moving picture magazine. Imme-

diately she had been drawn to it; she felt that it fitted. And he, in his journalistic capacity, might, if agreeable to him, be the medium of advertising the change to the world at large.

Leatrice—the very estate and sound of it seemed somehow to emphasize to him the depth and the width of the gulf opening between them. But he promised.

So Eddie, taking his bruised heart off his sleeve and putting it back in his breast to ache intolerably there, wrote for the top item of his weekly column one beginning: "All Whippoorwillville and vicinity are agog this week over the forthcoming departure of Miss Leatrice Ember, of here, rarely gifted daughter of the estimable late Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Ember, for the teeming metropolis of Greater New York City where she will——" and so forth and so on, twenty-odd lines of it, concluding with the ringing summary: "Our loss is Gotham's gain!"

He meant it, too, his valedictory flourish. You see, touching on Letty's future, Eddie had no doubts. Here at least he was in confident accord with his fellow Whippoorwillvillians. This was what made the parting all the harder for him—this sincere conviction that he was giving her up forever. You cannot hitch your depot agent to a star, and down in his soul Eddie knew it and by such knowledge was desolated utterly. Sense of an eternal loss drooped his shoulders as he walked across the echoing

boards of the platform and into his little rabbit hutch of a station on a given date after Number Seven, east-bound, due in at six twenty-two, due out at six twenty-four, had pulled away, plumping straight into the round red target of sunup.

Number Seven was carrying her off to join an innumerable caravan which journeys to besiege a heaven-piercing city of admirable desires. It is a caravan that is formed of youth. Its baggage train is loaded with hopes. The quick march of optimism briskens its processional step. Blithe old General Ego rides on ahead, in full command. But ultimately—of course, there has to be an ultimately, else many folks would never wake up from their daydreaming at all—the long casualty lists of disillusionment and despair will claim most of the names on this army's muster roll. Pardon me if here I seem to overstress the hyperbole; maybe I have been reading too many moving picture sub-titles lately.

Even so, facts are facts, no matter what fine feathers of language you dress them up in. And it is a fact that New York is a place of immortal rewards and terrific mortality averages. But quoting percentage sheets never yet turned back a striplings' pilgrimage. You might just as well hang a *Keep off the Grass* sign on an oasis and expect the famished travelers from across the burning sands to read it and heed it and head back for home.

Just then, floundering about for metaphor, I said Eddie Sackett's beloved went, that morning, to join a certain caravan. Rather, I should have called it a children's crusade, for that precisely is what it is—a children's crusade recruited from the deep ranks of inexperience. The girl who sang so much better than the rest of 'em in the village choir; the youngster who made a sweepstakes of it in the crossroads class of elocution; the born hewers of wood, the predestined drawers of water, who nevertheless yearn to hew the dumb marble into lines of sculptured life and draw deathless pictures for a reverent posterity; a whole generation of mute, inglorious Miltons, aspiring to be mute no longer nor yet inglorious; hallucinationists who diagnose as the pang of thwarted creation what really is the growing pains of their own mediocrity; auto-intoxicated adolescents mistaking the illusions of self-deception for a hankering after self-expression—by the dozen and the gross and the great gross they move on the city. Their going thither stands for dollars saved through patient sacrifice, for mortgages put on homesteads by flattered parents, for slender patrimonies to be spent, more often than not, on a vain quest.

You merely would be wasting your breath, though, did you, being wiser, try to warn the majority of them that inevitably and lamentably it must prove to be, for them, the very vainest of all possible quests. They are armored

against your warnings in confidence which, so many times, is only another name for conceit. Why should they listen to you? There, at her harbor's head, sits New York, the magic town. By virtue of a witchcraft resident in her New York is going to provide them with those precious elements, which until now, through no inherent fault of theirs, they have been denied. It is New York that will make noble swans out of all the little awkward goslings, that will turn these drab sparrows of the hedgerow into birds of paradise, that is craving to graft the notes of the nightingale upon the feeble larynx of the sandpiper. New York with its opportunities, its advantages, its instinct for recognition; New York with its schools of applied design, its schools of interior decorating, its schools of the dramatic arts and the plastic and the graphic; its schools of expression, its schools of voice culture and of music; its schools for making finished moving picture actors right out of the raw material—New York will somehow turn the trick. Good old appreciative, generous, discerning, observing, discovering New York!

So the stage-smitten amateurs who have neither grace nor personality but only a pale mimetic quality come hurrying to her embrace. And would-be writers of embroidered tales, who lack in imagination, in perception, in all sense for the right weight and the right color of words—they come along, too. And the boy whom a niggardly nature designed with intent

that he should spend his maturer years making neat blue stripes on the red spokes of new farm wagons—he comes. The trouble with him is he thinks he has been called into this earth to paint rings around the Old Masters. And with him, mayhap, comes his sister. But her happy delusion is, that, concealed somewhere about her trivial person, are the sweeping forces of a queen of tragedy.

They have gone as far as they could go in their restricted environment. Circumscribed and secluded as they have been, they nevertheless have felt the urge. They have triumphed above cramping circumstance; they have outgrown the small towns; behold, they have broken the bars. Surely, with the ambition that is in them and the feel of latent power that stirs them, they must go high and far there in New York where the horizons are so broad; where atmosphere and association make for development; where the producing manager stalks for hidden talent in the highway and fame is hiding around every corner eager to pounce forth and tag any unknown juvenile phenomenon.

But the truth is that New York is an Iron Maiden that takes them in her arms only to crack their young bones and squeeze out their blood. The reputable schools, the honest teachers, weed them out, keeping those who give promise of making dependable craftsmen, banning the rest. Some, discouraged at the outset and homesick and daunted by the chill

indifference of the town, return whence they came. They are, by odds, the luckier of those who are discarded. Others, as yet unhumbled and more persistent in their belief in themselves, fall into the maws of sharks who ply a shark's trade of imposture and fakery on the marshy verges of the arts; and it is the lot of these victims to be carried along by cajolery and deceit and false guidance until they have been stripped of their savings, then, eventually, to be cast adrift.

Here and there is one who, by reason of having real merit, wins and wins magnificently. The name of such a one is advertised to all the land. But the losers are not advertised. And only God Almighty knows what an annual bumper crop there is of the losers—that same compassionate Almighty who hearkens to the heartbroken sobs of some poor child alone, except for Him, in a hall bedroom, three floors up and all the way back, with her head buried in the thin pillows to shut out the hateful face of failure. But if her Maker did not graciously deign to plant the seeds of genius in her when He put her forth into the world, how can even He now piece together the scraps of her paltry, shattered little dream? Sooner or later, every Whippoorwillville sends its Letty Ember to the City.

But our present concern is with our own particular Letty Ember from this particular Whippoorwillville. Promptly, to Eddie and to

others as well, she wrote back letters that mainly were punctuated with exclamation points; about every fifth word was heavily underscored. New York was so wonderful—three black lines for emphasis under the "so" and a big "!" to finish with. Photographs and souvenir cards and printed descriptions did not begin to do it justice—it must be seen to be appreciated! One felt that in New York one could breathe, could expand, could grow! Surely one would never have time to get blue or faint-spirited here with so much to see and so much to do and such splendid goals to work toward!

True, there had been one small vexation at the outset. She had not been able to get into the Art Students' League, as she had counted on doing. It seemed the classes were all full at present; but to offset this though she had had a perfectly glorious piece of luck. She had been so fortunate as to be brought into contact with a Professor Beckermann, a very distinguished foreign painter, who took for his pupils only such beginners as had recognizable talent. He had condescended to look at those typical examples of her work which she had brought along to show what she could do. And he had been so enthusiastic over them, so sure of her ultimate greatness! Indeed, he had consented to take her on for a series of private lessons.

She was to call him "Master"; all his scholars called him "Master!"

Under him she would have individual attention, while at the Art League she merely would have been one of a group. He had explained to her the eminent advantages of this over the class system. It was bound to be a tremendous help to her; she would go forward so much faster than otherwise she could hope to go. And Professor Beckermann was so picturesque, so unconventional in dress and manner, so charmingly Bohemian! With him, surroundings seemed to count for nothing; he lived solely for his art. And he had technique at his very finger tips! And technique was all that she needed to land her at the very top of the profession. He had told her so himself. Wasn't she the lucky girl?

It must be confessed that living was very dear in New York. Everything cost ever so much more than the same thing would cost back home. And, of course, it was not to be expected that any one, let alone a little stranger from the country, should have the benefit of the Master's skill and knowledge without paying for it. But putting up with a few discomforts now only meant that supreme success would be coming all the sooner. Good-by and give her love to everybody. Already, Whippoorwillville seemed a million miles away. She was, in conclusion, Fondly, Leatrice.

Those first letters came in a white flock. It was as though she desired that at once and at first hand all her friends should know from

her how promising the outlook was and how determined she was that they, who were so very proud of her, should never be disappointed in her. Later, there was a space—a very blank space for Eddie Sackett—when she did not write. To himself Eddie strove manfully to find excuses for her silence. She must be terribly busy; he could appreciate what heavy demands New York must be making upon her, socially and otherwise. Still, if only about once in so often—say, once every two weeks—she could steal the time to send him a line, that certainly would help him to bear the separation better. He kept on writing to her.

Finally a letter from her did come. It would appear that since he last heard from her there had been certain changes in her plans. For one thing, she had about decided, temporarily at least, to take up commercial designing—posters for advertisements and trade illustrations, etc., etc., etc.; she had been given to understand that these things paid very well. This, of course, did not mean that she had lost interest in her more serious work. That always would be her real forte. But she merely thought of adding on the other for the time being, as a sort of side-line. She did not mention Professor Beckermann in connection with this venture. In fact, she did not mention him at all this time; presumably he was to be taken for granted. Also she had another important piece of news: Eddie would be interested to

hear that she no longer was staying in that stuffy, crowded old boarding house on West Fifty-seventh street. She had rented "bachelor girl quarters" farther downtown, so that she might have her workshop right there in her own snug, quiet little housekeeping apartment. She was now— just think of it—in the very heart of the city, only one block from Fifth Avenue! And Eddie, of course knew what Fifth Avenue was—the street of the most fashionable shops and the most exclusive clubs, with many of the largest hotels and lots of the leading theaters within easy walking distance. She thought it would be rather nice if Eddie would be so good as to write one of his pieces, mentioning this fact, for the *Dentondale Sun-Independent.* Everybody in Whippoorwillville and probably a lot of other people in Denton County would be thrilled to hear where she had moved to. That is to say, he need not give the exact address which she now sent him; it would be sufficient if he stated that her present location was just one block from Fifth Avenue, with all its life and gaiety. (Signed) Affectionately, Leatrice.

Eddie did as requested. He was proud to do it and Whippoorwillville was proud to read the tidings. He sent on the printed clipping of what he wrote in his next letter, which went forward three days later, immediately after the current week's issue of the paper came out. In the letter he rather betrayed his private

feelings. He admitted too deep regret that she seemed to be forgetting those at home who cared for her; at least, she certainly was neglecting them so far as the United States mails were concerned. He appreciated the difference in their relative positions these days—he plodding along in a poky little backwoods hole, she going ahead so rapidly in the artistic circles of Greater New York City. But with all that, he still only could *trust* and *pray* that she would not entirely cease to remember those *happy days gone by* which they had spent *together*. Eddie could do some underscoring himself when the occasion called for it.

A month later he got a scrap of a letter from her—no more than a dozen lines on one side of a half-sheet of note paper. Reading it, he judged that some little thing must have upset her. It ran like this:

"Eddie Dear—I have not forgotten you. I'm not going to forget you. Nearly all the time these days I think of you and of those who really cared for me formerly and believed in me. Oh, Eddie, I couldn't ever go back home if I failed, could I? Oh, Eddie, it's awful hard sometimes to keep on being brave when you're all by yourself nearly always. I don't suppose there's any place where a person can get to be as lonely as they are in a big city. Letty."

Eddie decided she must have been very much upset indeed to forget that her name now was Leatrice. Well, the weather had been terribly hot all the week in Whippoorwillville.

It must have been hot in New York, too. Maybe it was the weather that had got on her nerves.

He carried the letter about with him, reading it frequently and puzzling over it. It was the last letter he had from her. He was regularity itself, though—never let a week pass without writing.

One block from Fifth Avenue is Sixth. Now in New York, as has been stated by some one with almost an Old Testamental value of the strength of the repetitive, there are streets and streets. There are streets such as you may see in any one of half a dozen seaboard cities; and there are streets which in all main essentials might as well be the streets which parallel them. Parts of Eighteenth Street could be blended into Twenty-eighth or Thirty-eighth and nobody would mark the difference because there wouldn't be any difference to mark; the materials would match. Avenue A and Avenue B are twins. I know a stretch in Tenth Avenue which seems to have been copied, with a rare fidelity, from a stretch in Eleventh.

Then again there are streets such as you'll find nowhere else; streets which, having each one its own special individuality, are never by any chance to be confounded with any other streets there or elsewhere. They are the lines of character in the face of the city.

Take Wall Street; that's a deep wrinkle of

avarice in Manhattan's lower jaw. Take Riverside Drive. On second thought, don't; it already has been taken by gas tanks, billboards, Grant's Tomb, the New York Central tracks and miles of the homeliest apartment houses on this footstool—a natural glory spoiled by squatter sovereignty. Take Broadway, which in the night-time is a broad yellow streak down the spine of the town but which by day is seen to be dying of the same diseases that killed the Bowery—over-advertisement and not enough nourishment. Take the Bowery, smelling of stale memories, a stiff in a dirty winding sheet. Take Fifth Avenue if you can afford it. And take Sixth when you can afford nothing else. She's guaranteed not to be too rich for your blood.

Measured by feet, they lie within the span of a seventh of a mile, roughly. Yet by all other standards they are a thousand miles apart. Three minutes of brisk walking takes you from one to the other but takes you also into a distant world; there's a Great Divide between them. Fifth Avenue always is avowedly herself. With clumpings here and there, of big shops and hotels, bits of Sixth Avenue achieve a localized imitation of the rich sister—Cinderella trying on the silver slipper. But, mainly, Sixth Avenue keeps her own personality, too, and frankly is what Fifth might have been if Fifth hadn't had nearly all the luck in the family. Fifth is the front show window; Sixth is the

alley fence at the back. Even their currents flow contrariwise. Fifth runs uptown into billions; Sixth pours downtown into poverty. One lives on yellowbacks; the other thrives on the pennies. Fifth comes springing out of Washington Square to sweep irresistibly northward; Sixth goes sliding south from the haggard and consumptive trees of Central Park to lose itself finally in some most dismal labyrinths of the Lower West Side. A dollar doesn't get you anywhere at all on Fifth; on Sixth a thin dime gives you a fair run for your money. One is whipped cream; the other mostly is what was left over when they got through with the skimming. Dives rides through Fifth; Lazarus shambles along Sixth, and scratches himself and panhandles as he goes. Multiply the similes for as long as pleases you; every time you'll get the same result.

A proper studio should have a north light. But the window in the room of this artist looked eastward. There was only the one window; the wall breadth could not have accommodated two and still leave a place for the head of the bed to go. Being an east window it looked toward Fifth Avenue, but of Fifth Avenue there was visible, from this point, only a fretted and formidable skyline that rose beyond a jumble of boxed-in courts, and odds and ends of lesser buildings, and queer-shaped slices of wasted space inclosed in high useless fences.

Also there was a tree. It was one of those trees which seem to grow exclusively in New York back yards. Such trees thrive on dampness and everlasting shade and the Monday drippings from somebody's clothesline. They are curious fronded trees which give off a sour smell when the sap rises in them in the spring and again when their leaves wither in the fall. I do not know the right name for them; let's call them back yard trees. They are to be seen only when the wreckers tear away the houses in front, thereby exposing an inner walled town of rear tenements and unsightly sheds, which until then had been unrevealed and unsuspected; or when you live, say, as in this instance, on the third floor, back.

When the occupant of the room in point wearied of her own private view, which was often, and when she had the time to spare on her hands, which was generally, she might, by walking the length of a short hall to a window at the farther end of this hall, command a different outlook. Here, spread beneath, was life and plenty of it. The elevated, like a thousand-legged earwig, spraddled by just below her, with its striped back narrowing in perspective and finally diminishing off this way and that to nothing at all. And when the trains went past, like lesser insects scooting along up and down the spinal column of this greater one, their weight and their speed made the long endless worm shake; and the grating

of their wheels, for the moment, would drown out the sound of everything else.

The L structure chopped the vista short off at the downward angle. Even so, there was much to be observed by one stationed above. Within the compass of the block might be seen a taxidermist's shop, an undertaker's shop, a shop for the curing of raw furs, a misfit clothing parlor where garments which had died once elsewhere came to undergo a purgatorial delay under hot irons and benzine before their next reincarnation; a painless dentist's, a loan parlor, called by the vulgar, hock-shop; a bird and animal store advertising itself by its own aromas; a stationery store, a tobacconist, selling likewise daily papers and periodicals; a Yiddish lunchroom specializing in cold fried fish and strictly kosher hot frankfurters; a hat-cleaning establishment; a basement dweller who dealt in ice, coal and kindling wood; a Greek employment agency, a club for Swiss waiters, head, side, and omnibus; two orangeade stands, an Italian green-grocer's, a hardware store, a second-hand furniture store, a museum of human anatomy—Boys under Sixteen Positively Not Admitted; a corner where a saloon has been, now For Rent, With or Without Fixtures; a boot-blacking stand, a jobbing house in artificial flowers, a trunk store which always was on the point of going immediately out of business and therefore offered sacrificial bargains in suitcases and grips.

Not all these were on her side of the street nor yet all on the ground levels. They began in the cellars and they mounted above one another, flight by flight, to the attics; but all of them and more besides in that same briefened stretch, from crossing to crossing, might be ticked off on the fingers by one who had leisure for such employment, as this one had; and sundry establishments among them might also be smelled, especially where two or three firms hived together as joint lessees of a single floor, pooling, as it were, the essential perfumes of their respective businesses.

Lesser merchandisers, of the itinerant cast, throve on the sidewalk trade, preëmpting space for themselves in doorways and along curbstones and even out on the perilous roadway beyond the pavement line, and holding their ground against a clamorous and occasionally a threatening opposition. One day, warranted all-silk neckties seemed to have the favor of these ardent competitors; about every other one of them would be offering silk neckties at one for thirty-five, three for a dollar. Another day it would be bath sponges that they pushed, or patent pants hangers at ridiculously low prices, or roach poison in handy packages. But the pretzel venders never sought to tempt the popular fancy with new wrinkles. Their stocks, coiled like varnished brown snakes on upright spindles stuck around the edges of baskets or pushcarts, were staples, dependable and in con-

stant demand. This likewise was true of the dealers in dill pickles; they likewise knowing their public and having their regular clientèles.

Always, in the daytime, the avenue crawled with motion and went clanging the cymbals of industry. It was most active, though, and rivalry for customers reached the highest peaks at noontime when the loft workers came downstairs for lunch and air and conversation; surface vehicles scarcely could get through the wedged pack then. There were two Jewish men of this persuasion who daily stationed themselves in an areaway almost directly under the window where our lodger watched, coming together for the resumption of an argument which, it seemed, would never be ended. In time she came to know both of them and to be on the outlook for them. In a dulled sort of way they fascinated her; their inevitable appearance made an interlude in the deadened monotony of her own midday. One of them, a small shabby man, talked with his mouth, his shoulders, his legs, his arms, his collarless neck and his hands—notably with his hands. His hands were forever in motion. Frequently, in the fever of debate, his fingers clutched the air as though he would seize argument out of the ether. His antagonist, a second generation American and dressed accordingly, rarely spoke and never gesticulated. He expressed all varying emotions—contempt, doubt, acquiescence, denial, conviction, wavering—by three medi-

ums, to wit, his eyebrows, his under lip and the cigar that teetered between his teeth. His silence, somehow, was infinitely more potent than all the outcry of the posturing adversary. He probably had the most skeptical pair of eyebrows in the world, and the most eloquent lower lip. Certainly a more facile or a more oratorical cigar than his has never been rolled.

Your true creator of pictures could find material here to keep him busy squeezing tubes for a year. For this place, with its grindings and shriekings and its overhead quiverings, with its swarmings underfoot, its countless eager concerned faces, its jamming together of nervous bodies, its swirls and masses, its stinks, even, was a profile and a perfect cross-section of life that fairly dripped with the city's essence. Its component parts fell naturally into panoramic groups, and its local color was every color of humanity there is. But, as was said some pages back, this one had not within her what a bonafide artist must have. To her it was a brazen desolation of ugliness and heartlessness and harsh sounds, peopled with alien breeds of men and women following noisily after alien gods—the strange gods that were so disregardful of the lonely and the forsaken.

Down yonder in Whippoorwillville Eddie Sackett got so he just naturally couldn't stand it any longer. Faithfulness cannot feed for-

ever on itself; it needs more material provender, lest it starve to death outright. Anyway, from the standpoint of the economics, he was in position to take a trip. Out of its annual earnings and the fullness of its heart the railroad had at length its way clear to granting that raise in salary. Eddie put on his new mail order fall suit and caught Number Seven, east-bound. It had been nearly four months now since that last puzzling short letter came to him, nearly eight months since he had seen its writer.

A common carrier deposited him at Grand Central in the latter end of an October forenoon. From the moment of his arrival, almost, New York began jolting him financially. He knew what hotel he meant to stop at; it was one that advertised in the *Dentondale Weekly Sun-Independent*, mentioning moderate rates for single rooms with bath. The directions concerning street cars which a policeman at a door of the station gave him seemed distressingly intricate. To be on the safe side he took a taxicab. And the taxicab literally ate up money. Nearly every time he looked at the meter it had jumped another ten cents. Eddie Sackett wasn't stingy, but in Whippoorwillville a dime was nevertheless a dime and you expected some proper return for it.

Then there was the hotel when he arrived there, a confusing, a mastodonic, and despite its printed promises, an expensive establish-

ment. A clerk gave him a room at a rate per day which the clerk evidently regarded as a very reasonable rate. It was dinner time now —dinner time comes in the middle of the day at Whippoorwillville—and Eddie Sackett, for all his devotion, was none of your puling and pining lovers; Eddie was hungry. He asked the location of the dining room and was directed to a place called the grill. But the tariffs, as set forth on the menu, were calculated to bitt his appetite. Moreover, there was a waiter of an aggressive aspect who exhaled in evident and audible impatience as Eddie ran a forefinger down the price list, and this fussed the new guest. In his flustered state his eye finally fell, halfway down the card, on a fish dish—fish *a la something*, with sauce *something else*—which alone, of all the items named, seemed reasonably priced.

He told the waiter he would take a piece of that, with coffee and bread and butter and fried potatoes. It was quite a long time before these things were brought and after they had been brought and he had eaten, a genuine shock awaited him. The total cost of the meal, as scribbled on the check, was the cause of this shock. To begin with, there were separate entries for the bread and the butter and for the cup of coffee and the potatoes. They threw those things in free with every meat order at the Elite Restaurant back home; but it appeared that in New York they were charged

for—and when he questioned the amount entered on account of the principal dish the waiter, producing the menu, which in accordance with the metropolitan custom, he previously had taken away with him, directed Eddie's attention to the figures plainly printed there. Eddie saw his error then; all things considered, though, the mistake had been, on his part, a perfectly natural one. The "20" hadn't meant twenty cents at all; it had meant twenty minutes.

In spite of the prospects of mounting outlays it became necessary for him to take another taxicab in order speedily to reach his next destination. After listening to certain involved and bewildering statements by the uniformed official who warded the hotel entrance, he had a conviction that, going afoot, the trip would eat up hours of his time. And he was in a hurry to get where he was going. At least, so he was at the moment of starting.

But as the taxi took him on his way, crisscrossing in and out of streets which roared to the traffic in them, a grave doubt as to the wisdom and the advisability of his adventure began to assail Eddie. Considering it, he almost forgot to view the shifting sights or watch for the spasmodic bounding of the meter. That same doubt had been living in the back part of his mind since before he started for New York; his advent into the city and a sudden daunting realization of the size of the city had quickened

it into this present activity. He had not written to his sweetheart of his intent. He had jubilantly designed to take her by surprise. Just what was to follow on the heels of the surprise—what he would say and do, what he would propose, what he would suggest, he did not exactly know. At no time of his exciting thirty-hour journey had he known exactly. He had been content to let the immediate future take care of its own contingencies; and now here he was in New York, bound for her studio and due there shortly, and still with no definite plan of campaign—practically with no valid excuse for having come at all. Question marks began to pass before him in a succession of heavy curlycues. What right had he, without invitation or encouragement, to bring his puny desires, his hopeless longings, his unimportant countrified self to her here in this place of her great endeavors and her greater aspirations? She would be busied in noble undertakings; engrossed inevitably in congenial and suitable companionships; and he—well, he was just plain inconsequential Eddie Sackett, forlorn and desperate from lovesickness. He was a fool and it was a fool's errand that had brought him and, for him, humiliation and regret must lie at the impending end of the journey. Maybe it would be better, all round, if he turned back——

The jolt of stopping jarred him to realities. The taxi had halted almost directly under some

sort of trestled railway. As he stepped out, Eddie comprehended the surroundings. Dubiousness arising from a fresh cause—from a condition now and not from theories—assailed him. Was it possible that this neighborhood actually bordered on Fifth Avenue? It wasn't possible, surely!

"Are you certain this—this is the right place?" he asked, making exact change to cover the amount of the fare as recorded. "Looks to me like we must have made a mistake."

"Same address wot you gimme," stated the driver. He flirted his thumb. "Dis is Sixth Avenoo and dere's your number." He derisively flipped the coins Eddie put in his hand; the absence of a tip annoyed him. He set his car in motion and went briskly away.

Right enough, the proper number was set above the door directly in front of him; but the door opened into a small cluttered cigar store. Within, behind a showcase, with his back half turned to Eddie, was a dark, foreign-looking man. He swung a broad and sullen face about as Eddie hesitated on the threshold.

"Vell?" he inquired. His voice seemed to come rumbling from his lower abdomen.

"I'm looking for Miss Leatrice Ember," said Eddie, "in care of a Miss Harriet Devore."

"Mush Devo'?" With the least possible waste of physical energy the man motioned to the left. "Dwo vlights upt!"

"Which?—did you say two flights up?"

"Pshure! — don' you onderstan' Unglish? Oudside und upt der shteps. Ring der doorbell on der landink ven you get dere."

So Eddie, more mystified than ever, went outside and up the steps indicated—remarkably dirty steps they were—mounting a well of semi-darkness until he came to the second of a pair of long narrow halls and to a door which faced him at the turn of the staircase. Set in the jamb of the doorway was a push-button. There was a card tacked to the woodwork alongside the button but in that light he could not read what was written or printed on it. Something was wrong; this couldn't possibly be the place. He might be pretty ignorant of New York, but some things he knew intuitively. Still, since he had come this far he might as well go farther. On a venture he rang the bell.

Response was immediate. The door opened part way. A woman's shape showed rather dimly in the opening—Eddie was vaguely aware of the details of much and very bright hair and a vivid kimono—and a woman's voice challenged him with:

"Well, what?"

"I'm looking for a Miss Harriet Devore's house," stated Eddie; "but I guess maybe——"

"Quit guessin' then, you got your wish."

"Could I see her a minute?"

"You're seein' her now." She seemed unnecessarily short. "And part of your minute is gone already. Make it snappy, Waldo!"

"Was there—is there a young lady named Ember——"

"They was—and they is." She had such a disconcerting way of interrupting.

"Well, I just happened to be here in New York," said Eddie, his diffidence increasing, "and I just thought I'd drop in——"

The suddenness with which she moved caused him to break off his speech of explanation. With a jerk she had opened the door wider so that a better light from within, where the gas was turned on even though it still was mid-afternoon, shone past her on him. Her voice had sharpened too:

"Say, are you by any chance from down yonder, wherever it is, that she come from?" Seeing him now more distinctly, she answered herself: "Yes, you must be! And, say, are you a friend of hers?"

"Yes, I am."

"Good friend—know what I mean?—old-time friend from the old home town and everything?"

"Yes, of course."

"And still they's some'll say this religion stuff is the bunk!" This speech was not a question; it was an exclamation, rather.

"Which, ma'am? I don't know as I get you. You see, I've known her pretty much all my life and I——"

"You have? Then come on in here with me a minute."

She backed away and he followed her into

what plainly was a room where the domestic side of living was consolidated with its social side, and she revealed to him a head of golden hair that was too good to be true—even Eddie could tell that—and a curiously pouched and mottled middle-age face. With a puffy hand she closed the folds of her red robe at her throat and spoke rapidly:

"Say, listen: It's almost like as if you'd been sent—comin' to-day of all the days in the whole year. Here all day long, ever since this mornin', I've been wonderin' what they was for me to do. And then in you walk! And you ast me does she live here! And say you're a friend of hers!"

"Is she sick? Has something happened?"

"Something has mighty near happened. Say, listen: How long is it since you seen this kid?"

"Not since the eighteenth day of last February, when she first started East," replied Eddie.

"And how long has it been since you heard from her—letter or message or something?"

"June twenty-third was the last letter I got."

Seemingly without reason and all in one moment, the woman turned violent:

"Say, what the hell was you and all the rest of the people in that hick town thinkin' about anyway, leavin' her all alone here all this time? Wasn't they nobody nowheres that'd have the interest in her to find out about her?"

Eddie stiffened. In that same instant, too, he had found himself.

"She had me," he said stoutly. "She's got me now. Only, if anything serious has been the matter I didn't know a word about it."

"You're goin' to know about it in a minute. It'd be better for me to tell it to you first—much as I know—and then maybe that'll sort of save her feelin's. Listen: She's been sick, all right, but it ain't nothin' that a doctor could cure her of. It's a different sort of medicine she's needin'."

"Where is she? Let me——"

"Just a minute. Lemme give you the dope first. I reckon it's news to you, ain't it, to hear that she's been strictly up against it? Well, she has, like many another like her is, in this man's town. She come here—let's see, it was back yonder along about the end of May it must 'a' been—and taken my small back room on this here same floor. I lease these here two top floors and rent them, furnished, by the week, get me? I ain't payin' her any mind except to collect from her every Sat'day night. These here lodgers don't mean anything to me; they come and go. I got my own worries, me doin' the best I can and just about gettin' by, what with some of these skates runnin' out on me every little while and bilkin' me out of my rent money and all. So all I notice about her is that she's quiet and ladylike and minds her own business, whatever it is. But here lately

it seemed like she's been stickin' in her own room mighty close—well, that's all right, too. But this mornin' early I smelled gas 'scapin'—we burn gas here—and I traces it to her room and they she is, layin' in bed with the gas turned on full."

He seized her by her arms and shook her. He was altogether a new Eddie Sackett—masterful, white, tense, on edge to defend and to succor his womankind.

"She's all right? It was an accident? She's still here?"

"She's all right, so far as that goes. And she's still here. But it wasn't no accident, Mister—Mister——"

"Sackett—Sackett's the name, damn it!"

"Not no accident, Mister Sackett. She was fixin' to do a Dutch—get me? She wasn't far gone, though—the gas hadn't had a good chance yet to get her. A little fresh air and me workin' over her a spell and she comes right out of it. And then, bein' weak and all, she just breaks down and spills the whole works to me. Seems like she come up here from that comic town of yours with the trick name, aimin' to set New York on fire paintin' pictures. And right away she falls for some sort of a greasy faker that promises to set her in right, and he skins her out of the biggest part of her jack—her money, I should say. And then he turns cold on her and gives her the air. And she comes down here and hires a room off of me,

figurin' maybe she can live cheap and get by for awhile doin' picture jobs for business houses or something. But the stuff she turns out is the limit and nobody don't want it—the poor kid! And what little money she's got left begins to run low on her. And she begins to get wise that she's been playin' a big game of pretend and it ain't got her nowheres—and never will, neither.

"With a girl like her in that fix, here in New York, they ain't but one of three ways out—she can go on the streets, or she can go back, licked, to the place where she come from, or she can bump herself off. And this kid was too decent to turn hustler—excuse me if I speak plain language, but that's the facts of it. And she was too proud to go back home and own up to everybody that knows her how she'd flopped. She just couldn't bear the thought of that, she told me; seemed like anything else was better than that. She can't bear the thought of 'em knowin' it, even now. So, what with her bein' so lonesome and down-and-out, and livin' for months on bum food and not any too much of that, and never gettin' nowheres, she just decided to turn on the gas. She tells me she'd heard that gas is one of the easiest ways of croakin' they is.

"What I guess I should 'a' done, findin' her that way, was call a cop and get an ambulance sent for and have her taken off to the hospital or the station house or somewheres. But I

didn't have the heart to do it. So, instead of attendin' to my own business, I been settin' here wonderin' where she was goin' to head in and what I was goin' to do about her myself—and then this here bell rings and in you walks—the first, last and only person that ever come astin' for her all the time she's been here. I'll say it again—it's like as if you'd been sent as an answer!" Suddenly a note of doubtfulness came into Miss Devore's voice. "But say, listen: Think you can get her to go back home, Mister Sackett? She's still dead set that her home folks ain't never to know the truth about how she failed—says she'll die first, before she'll tell 'em. If she goes, you'll have to cover up for her, some way."

"Think I can get her to go? Huh, I'm going to take her! She's good enough for that town or any town. She's too good for this damn town!"

"Boy, listen: You and me live more'n a thousand miles apart, I guess, and our ways of thinkin' may be even further apart than that. But when you talk like that I got to hand it to you for bein' an all-right guy. But—but what'll she do when she gets home—without money and no way to earn her own livin' and not no kinsfolks to fall back on neither, from what she tells me. That's something for you and her both to think about."

"What does she need with money?" The manner of the protector and the provider

competently was his. "I've got the money. I reckon I can make a living for two. My wife won't have to work."

"Your wife?"

"Certainly! We're going to be married—married right here in your house, if you'll let us."

"If I'll let you? Say, listen, man, I'll give the bride away."

"Then let's go tell her!"

"Tell her what?"

"Tell her she's going to be married, soon as the minister and the license can get here."

"Say, for a guy from a rube town you're swift, ain't you? When I first saw you five minutes ago I didn't think it was in you, honest I didn't. How long have you two been engaged anyhow? She never mentioned bein' engaged when she was spillin' her troubles out to me this mornin'."

"A long time," said Eddie; "only she didn't know it. But I knew it all along. And say, Miss Devore, there's a reason why I'm specially glad you're going to let us get married here."

He half shut his eyes, the journalist, shaping in his mind the introductory sentence of the telegram he would send that night for publication in the ensuing issue of the *Dentondale Weekly Sun-Independent:* "Wedded: At the studio apartment of the bride, in Greater New York City, one block from Fifth Avenue, Whippoorwillville's most gifted daughter, and

more lately one of Gotham's rising and successful young artists, Miss Leatrice Ember, to ye proud and happy scribe——"

He snapped back to roseate earth again.

"Well, what are we waiting for, Miss Devore? Let's go tell her."

The woman led the way for him out into the hall and down the hall to its darker and deeper end and there swung open a door for him to enter by. As the girl on the cot bed sat up and cried her joy at sight of him who crossed the threshold to take her in his arms, Miss Devore, turning her head, uttered, aside and to herself, what was at once a defiance, a boast, a triumphant pronouncement and, yes—by the blowsy Miss Devore's curious standards—a prayer:

"And still they's some'll say they ain't no God!"

CHAPTER III

"—THAT SHALL HE ALSO REAP"

THERE was no manner of doubt about it, the old town had changed, and mightily changed, in these four years. It had changed both in spirit and in the flesh. It was not so much the strange faces topping strange bodies which I saw on every side of me, nor yet the strange names of sign-boards over store fronts, nor even the new and therefore strange buildings which had risen up here and there, that kept driving consciousness of the outstanding fact into my brain, stroke by stroke, like the tapping of a persistent hammer. Rather, it was the altered look, the profanely altered look of familiar objects; that and, more than that, the altered mien of familiar individuals.

For example now, on the physical side, take the old wharfboat. On her broad belly she spraddled the waters in her proper place at the foot of Franklin street, as misshapen as a dropsical woman, as toused-looking as an untidy woman, all of which was as it should be,

an estate and station fixed by tradition and the ordered years. What gave to her, in my eyes, an alien and an unhallowed aspect was a mixed covey of motor-boats nuzzling her inner flanks with their several noses. Lo and behold, here rode this puddle-duck regatta when by rights lordly white packeteers, two or three of them anyhow, maybe four or five of them, should be ranked against her outer gunwales. I knew, of course, that big steamboating, as big steamboating used to be, was a page that had been torn out of the book; but it took this thing to push the lesson home—motor boats by the doubled dozen and a fussy huckstering little sternwheeler of a way-trader, an overgrown ferry-boat really, taking aboard a slender dribble of freight for upstream points.

Of the ancient wagon-yards just one lorn survivor abided, wearing its dimmed brick façade before its sagged wooden walls like a soiled dickey to hide a yet grimier shirt. All its sister wagon-yards had been converted into —guess what? No you needn't; you'll know anyway without guessing. All the rest had been converted and none of them was in any serious peril of backsliding into its former state judging by the visible huddles of cheap cars with the dried mud of back-country roads crusting their guards. In number these were a great number. They blocked off the curbings in the old wagon-yard district south of Market Square.

Oh, plainly enough, progress was the order of the day. It seemed to me that never in like area had I beheld so many corners adorned with so many hip-roofed chalets dedicated to the purveying of gasoline. In one end of the old Clear Creek Distillery Company's warehouse they were making chewing-gum, no less, and in the other end, beyond a plank-walled partition, sheep dip, patent fertilizers and an ingratiating compound guaranteed to put ambition into lackadaisical hens. Out on the Blandsville road just past the corporation line, I saw where Bud Quillian's old stand now wore a Janus-faced sign advertising itself, on this side, as The Last Chance Garage; on that side as the First Chance Garage; and I saw how that modern ingenuity thus borrowed a note of whimsicality from the olden days, seeing that in Bud Quillian's time this also had been a filling station—of sorts—and its name had been The First and Last Chance, too. And with a sand-blasting device mounted on wheels they were washing down the walls of the old court house, each impious onslaught abolishing one of those long sooty streakings under the eves or one of those soft coal accumulations around the window openings which, when you looked at the court house, would put you in mind of a chimney-sweeper's weekday face.

These things, all of them, were patently significant of the new ordering of things. But what, to my way of thinking, was more signifi-

cant still was the transformation that had taken place in many of those that I knew. I am not speaking of the signs of aging in some of them; that was to be expected. You may stand still in certain regards for years on years but your wrinkles will keep right on enhancing in depth and number. To be sure, sundry ones, it would appear, had leaped abruptly out of one generation into another. Youngish men and women had become middle-aged; middle-aged men and women had crossed the line to elderliness. Here a sex tragedy made itself manifest; mainly it was the women who seemed to have turned the corner first. Reaching a certain point in their lives men merely get older but women get old. But, as I was saying, I am not speaking so much of what the passage of time had done to their faces and their shapes, but of another thing: unless I was woefully mistaken, there was a new note of nervous alertness about them. It was generally abroad; you could breathe it in with the air, could catch its cadence in the sound of drumming footsteps. People moved more briskly than formerly they had. They had a sprightlier habit of speech and more worldly-wise manners. It seemed they looked more to the future and less upon the past than in my time of dwelling among them. They were, as the word goes, peppy.

Presently I got the answer to my riddle, or at least I thought I did. A town of a settled and an institutional spirit goes along for awhile

taking on age placidly, almost imperceptibly. It is like that woman of Solomon's song whose ways are ways of pleasantness and all her paths are peace. Then—*bango!*—all of a sudden something happens; maybe a professional boosting club; maybe a civic improvement movement with an earnest lady at its head; maybe a municipal earthquake, and almost overnight that town of yours has changed in its garb, its port and its tempo, in its habits of thought and action and purpose. Now, measured by years, it had been but a handful of them—a year, say, for each finger and half a year for your thumb—since I last had been back. Measured by that which I have here tried to describe it might have been decades.

There were two men of my acquaintance, though, who had not altered by so much as a pepper-corn; or, if they had, my eye could not appraise it. Yet these two were two who had attained to what Shakespeare's Jaques called his last scene of all, and by the laws which govern mortal change should have been gnawed by time's tooth more deeply than most. On second thought, perhaps Judge Priest was a trifle more fumbly in his gait than when I saw him last before this. And possibly Dr. Lew Lake's sparse frame had shrunken by the breadth of ever so narrow a whipstitch. But on this first night of my return, as I sat with this pair who were almost the last that were left of my father's closer friends, I told myself

that they miraculously had endured on, untouched in mien or fashion of speech, whilst all others about them either had gone ahead or had slipped back. It gave me a comforting sensation as though, passing down a stream in freshet, I happened upon a brace of seamed but solid and dependable old buttresses uprearing as the sole remaining props of a structure shifted by the flood from its former foundations and transmogrified out of its former likeness.

We sat, the three of us and no more, upon Judge Priest's front porch, where the moonlight, sifting through the screen of dishrag vines, made a pattern of black Spanish lace on white brocade; and Jeff Poindexter, the judge's auxiliary shadow, who was very dark and very silent, as a shadow should be, brought us soothing mixtures in tall glasses. And the talk ran this way and that, one thing bringing up another, as it does, until I saw my way clear to steer it into a channel of my own choosing, the intent on my part being to draw from them the completed tale of a matter to which that afternoon they had given me most alluring hints.

I had begun my visit on a day of history. It was the day of the dedication of the new hospital. I had known of course there was a new hospital toward. In letters from home through months past I had been advised of its building. In the *Daily Evening News* I read where the editor, with pardonable pride, pointed out that

this was to be the largest institution of the sort ever erected in any city of less than thirty thousand inhabitants south of Mason and Dixon's Line. What I had not known until after arriving that morning—or if I had known had forgotten it—was the whereabouts of its site.

To me, living these latter years a thousand and odd miles away, the commons below the old barracks continued still to wear the look it had worn for me in my boyhood. Re-creating it mentally I saw that there should be a small gravelly bluff dropping abruptly away from the built-up line of Yazoo Street, thence a flattened terrain pocked with crawfish holes and at its farther edge fringed with a whisker line of straggly willows where the face of the earth dipped its retreating chin in the river; and to carry the simile of a face still on, two red-rimmed gravel pits for the rheumy eyes and, for a nose, one upthrust spindle of ruined brickwork set right in the middle of the space.

But when I came that afternoon to the verge of the hollow facing the river I found my immediate view blocked by the majestic bulk of the Humphrey Bray Memorial Hospital, standing all complete now and ready for service. Directly in front of me it reared the fine white stone and red brick formalities of its main part, and, to right and left, spread-eagled its wings across a wide strip of man-made fill, with terraces rippling grandly down to smoothened

stretches of what now was naked soil but soon would be green lawn, and leading from where I stood up to its broad steps, a double row of lopped saplings—no more than switches today, but some day, Lord granting it, they would be bushy-topped maples beneath which convalescents might sit enshaded to take the river breeze.

The exercises of dedication began at three o'clock, and when they began I was there, one of a multitude. There was a speech by that modern Demosthenes, ex-Congressman Dabney Prentiss, as attorney for the estate of the deceased donor, he turning the completed hospital over to the county for its usages forevermore; and then a speech by the county judge, this being a sweated and nervous gentleman who was no Demosthenes, or if he was, was one who had forgotten to spit out his pebble; he, for his part, accepting the gift on behalf of the county and in turn transferring it to the keeping of the local medical profession; and of course there were prayers—invocation and benediction—by reverend men who took the Almighty into their confidence and explained to Him at length and in detail the intent of all that here took place. Also there was music by Dean's band. And finally, there was a crowd of thousands standing in the warm spring sunshine to see and to hear all this, and afterwards to tour the building. Chance and the pressure of human bodies had thrust me into

the company of Judge Priest and Doctor Lake; they had anchored themselves against the drifting human tides in the middle of Yazoo Street after they came down from the temporary platform whereon the oratorical phases of the ceremonies had been staged; and for more reasons than one I was glad these agencies had so luckily wrought. The crowds were shredding away from our immediate vicinity when the old judge aimed the brass ferrule of his slatted and venerable cotton umbrella where, directly above the entrance doors, at the level of the second-floor windows, there gaped a niche in the wall, empty now but beyond peradventure designed to contain bronze or stone.

"See that there little recess up yonder?" he said, reducing his normal high-pitched whine to a discreet undertone. "I understand they're aimin' to stick a statue or a bust of old man Humphrey up there. It seems like the sculpture man up North didn't quite git it done in time fur today. Well, suzz, it makes me laugh inside of myself to think of a stone figger of him gazin' happily down on a charity provided and paid fur with money of his savin'—it most certainly does, me knowin' him like I did. Still, when they git it derricked up there I s'pose that'll make a finished job of the whole thing in the eyes of the populace at large. But not in my eyes—no, suh-ree." He chuckled a meaningful little chuckle into his wisp of white chin whisker. "Ef justice should be done where

justice is due there'd be a figger of a mighty different-lookin' person from the late onlamented set there in that vacant jog, eh, Lew?"

And at that Doctor Lake had nodded his fine old head in brisk assent.

"You hit the nail square on the head then, Billy. Now, by rights the statue that should be planted there would be one cut of black marble instead of out of white—a statue of a lowering old nigger woman with her underlip stuck out like the fender on a street car, and her hands on her hips. Something like that would be the proper ticket."

I noted that he, too, spoke somewhat under his breath and into his beard, as though mindful not to take any third person into his confidence. So, naturally, by what they had said and by the way they said it, my curiosity was quickened to the point where I made so bold as to ask them for an explanation of these most cryptic comments of theirs.

"You drop round to my place tonight after you've had supper at your mother's," the old judge said. "Lew, here, 'll be there and we'll set a spell and mebbe we'll tell you the real meanin's of what we've jest been hintin' at. You might git the groundwork fur one of them pieces you write out of it. Purty near time the yarn wuz told in its true colors anyway, seein' that all actually concerned air dead and gone—ain't I right, Lew?"

The time was that same night, and the place, as has been stated, was the front porch of the old white house out on Clay Street. It was quiet there, a most restful spot. About once in so often the grackles roosting in the twin cedars at the foot of the steps stirred and gabbled sleepily, and about once in not quite so often a screech owl with an uneasy conscience made wailing confession of his sins somewhere down in the old Enders orchard. A car passed and sounded like a dozen cars.

"Well, son," said Judge Priest, "I reckin you've happened on the only two persons left in this world that're qualified to give you the real inside facts about this here matter. Yes, suh, you might say you've come direct to headquarters." From the patch of darkness where he took his ease his voice came as a voice out of a void, and the fire in his pipe bowl was one little red star set in the black of a lonely firmament. "Had I better start the yarn off, Lew, or will you do it?"

"You go ahead, Billy," said the old physician, from where he sat. "You go ahead and do the log raising. I'll provide some of the chinking when it's necessary."

"All right, then," agreed the judge. "Well, son, I figger you ain't been livin' up amongst the Yankees so long but whut you still kin recall old man Humphrey Bray ez he looked twenty-odd years ago when you wuz a boy

growin' up around here? And of course you recall Miss Cordelia, his old-maid daughter?"

I uttered sounds to indicate that I remembered.

"Well, suzz, Hump Bray always wuz a puzzle to me, more or less. He wouldn't strike you offhand ez bein' specially smart. He'd be more apt to strike you ez bein' sort of dull and slow-witted. But he had the sense to make money and the sense to keep it after he made it—both qualities which the good Lord in His wisdom hez seen fit to deny me, fur one. Such bein' the case with me, personally, p'raps it's jealousy which prompts me to disparage his gifts in these directions; still, even so, I wouldn't exactly call it brains. Ef you ask me I'd call it a sort of an instinct—this here money-makin' faculty of his. Some men air towards a hidden dollar like one of these here little black-and-tan terriers is towards a rat. There's a rat, we'll say, layin' snug and quiet behind a baseboard. You and me would pass there a hundred times and never suspect that he wuz round. But along comes your terrier and he takes one sniff at a crack and starts diggin' Mister Rat out. And ef he can't git him by diggin' he'll camp right there until the rat ventures forth, and then nail him and have his life's blood. Well, there's aplenty men organized the same way, only their game is dollars and not rats. They've just natchelly got the nose fur it. They kin smell out a hidden dollar

where the run of us wouldn't even think to look fur it, and on top of that they've got the patience and the persistency to hang round until they've got their ever lovin' fingers twined about it in a grip which only death kin loosen. I jedge a good many of these here multimillionaires that you hear so much about these times are built on them lines. I wouldn't say myself that it's the happiest way to live, or the best way; but I do say this—it seems to satisfy them which follows after it ez a regular callin'.

"It certainly satisfied Humphrey Bray. I kin recall like it wuz yistiddy when he moved over here frum Mims County. It was right after the Big War. It wuz a poor time fur this country and he had the look about him of bein' a poor man frum a poor district. You'd say, to look at him, that everything he'd ever tackled had failed up on him. Well, right there is where he'd deceive you. He deceived everybody here fur quite a spell. He opened up a rusty, smelly little den which he called an office, in one of them old ramshackle houses down on Front Street, which they afterward tore down to make room fur the new ice factory, and he started in to dealin' in lands and mortgages and loandin' little dabs of money at high interest and the like. Even though he could shave a note right down to the quick, people couldn't figger how he was earnin' any more than his keep. They used to wonder how him

and his wife got along—that is, they did at first. He never seemed to be doin' much business and whut business he did do wuz in dribs—a few dollars put out on security here, and a few put out there. All day you'd see him coiled up behind his old desk fiddlin' with a set of books and mebbe frum breakfast time till dark not a single soul to darken his doors.

"Well, he went along that way fur years. He had a child born to him—one child, her that you afterwards knew as Miss Cordelia—and about the time she wuz born he moved out to the old Grundy place three miles frum town. That is to say it wuz three miles frum town then, but whut with all these real-estate developments, the whole neighborhood is built up mighty near solid now. Takin' over the old Grundy place didn't stamp him in the public mind as bein' prosperous. It wuz purty badly run down and goin' to seed and dry rot; and besides it wuz ginerally known that he'd took it over on a foreclosure fur practically nothin'.

"And then one mornin' people had a fresh cause to wonder about Humphrey Bray. Because they woke up all of a sudden to the realization that he wuz about the second richest man in this county and in a fair way to be the richest, too, ef he kept his health and stayed in his right mind. The Planters' Bank took him in as a director and purty soon made him a vice president. He wuz a powerful good

hand to have round when it came to votin' No on a proposition to loan somebody more money than the collateral seemed to justify. Every bank, big or little, needs somebody like him on its board. From money tradin' on a small scale he branched out hither and yon till before long there wuz hardly a goin' concern in town but whut he had a busy probin' finger in it somewheres. But down yonder on Front Street he still kept his little old dollar trap baited and set, and he still went on livin' in a kind of a nibblin' frugal way. He just about did keep the old Grundy place weather-tight and that wuz all. A mile away you could hear its clapboards callin' fur a fresh coat of paint. You probably won't recall this part, son, him havin' passed on to his reward, whutever it wuz, when you wuz still a shaver in knee britches, but behind his back people used to call him Kangaroo Bray. It wuzn't that he looked like a kangaroo; he'd put you more in mind of a little old gray weather-beaten rabbit. But natural history records that the kangaroo is born with a pocket. But they didn't call him that to his face, you betcher. A man who's got half a million laid by and is in a fair way to run it up to a million is commonly treated with respect by one and all. You kin hear his respectability rustlin' in his wallet ez he passes you by.

"Well, in the fullness of time his wife died, not causin' much more excitement in dyin'

than whut she had in livin', which wuz practically no excitement at all, and then one day he hauled off and died too. He didn't come home to supper in the evenin', and when Miss Cordelia got worried and sent a darky in frum the place to look fur him they found his old hoss and buggy hitched outside his office and him inside bunched up in a chair with a handkerchief over his face and his lap littered with promissory notes and other precious documents. He'd left a will, and by it he'd left everything he owned to his daughter. Not a cent went to poor people on whose necessities he'd been tradin' all these years, nor not a two-bit piece to good works—but all to her. Outside of the directors in the bank not a great many people went to his funeral. But practically everybody heartily indorsed the idea of it, eh, Lew?"

Down in his throat Doctor Lake made rumbling assent. "I don't seem to remember a more popular movement," he said.

"I want to be fair, though," went on Judge Priest. "He had one sincere mourner, anyway—his daughter. He'd left her alone in the world, sure enough; with all her money she cut a mighty lonesome, mighty pitiful figure. Them that envied her fur all her dollars didn't furgit to be sorry fur her, too, I reckin; because if ever there wuz a woman ordained and brought into the world to be an old maid she wuz the one. Why, she had that there onmistakable old-maid look about her before she wuz out

of short dresses—primmish and precise and always displayin' a kind of a skeered nervousness, ef you git whut I mean. And ez she grew older the signs of it grew more pronounced, seemed like, with every month that rolled over her head. There's one kind of old maid everybody in a community loves—because she loves everybody and everything, I jedge, and, bein' denied wifehood and motherhood on her own account, goes round motherin' up stray ash cats and lost dogs and other people's neglected babies. And there's another kind of old maid that don't seem to fit in anywheres, but air shy and awkward and always on the outside of whut's goin' on. And I reckin there ain't no more mournful lot fur any human bein' to fill than that is—specially in a town about the size, say, of this one, where everybody knows who and whut you are. But, shuckin's, son, whut's the use of my drivelin' on about Miss Cordelia Bray, when you saw her every day of your life, purty near it, up till the time you went away frum here to live? You kin picture her jest ez well ez I kin."

I did get the picture clearly enough. Across the eye of my mind it came walking in out of the darkness—that small, shrinking, flat-chested shape, dressed always in garments which seemed to have been devised for some other woman to wear, that shy, bleak face, those pale, yearning eyes, of the town's chief heiress. The completed image as I had last seen it was

most amply conjured up. But it had taken the old judge's words to give me adequate understanding of this woman, who might have had everything which money will buy, and yet through all the days she walked this world utterly lacked for those gifts which money cannot buy—physical comeliness, grace, warmth, high spirit, personality, the art of making friends, the joys of loving and being loved in return. Oh, yes, I could see her!

"Let's see, now, where wuz I?" went on Judge Priest when Jeff, obeying a wheezed command, had done his duty by the drained toddy glasses. "Oh, yes! Well, suzz, fur all the money she had now at her command, Miss Cordelia Bray went on livin' purty much ez she had lived whilst her paw wuz alive. She did fix up the old Grundy homestead with paint and a new roof and one thing and another, and she had the fences mended, and planted flowers round the house where before there'd been a regular jungle of weeds and briers, but she didn't put on any special amount of style, otherwise. Fur one thing, she didn't clutter the place up with servants—jest kept right on with Aunt Jurdina and Uncle Silas, them two faithful old darkies that had been workin' fur the Bray family since away back before she wuz born. But in a quiet kind of a way she done a right smart fur charity and fur her church, which that, I'm bound, wuz one trait she hadn't inherited frum her paw. With old

Humphrey it wuz a case of charity beginnin' at home and stayin' right there too. It never got a chance to stray off the premises whilst he held the purse strings. And he'd never been much of a hand fur churchgoin', neither, and certainly he'd never qualified at churchgivin'. 'Lowin' him his dues, we've got to admit that he differed frum some of these here confirmed money grabbers—he never tried to hide his greedy little soul under the mask of religion. But Miss Cordelia took after her mother, I jedge. Anyhow, she wuz mighty faithful to her church and mighty generous to it, too, oncet she got the control of her estate.

"Well, the years went rollin' by. Lawsy, but how they do roll by on a feller! And here, all of a sudden, seemed like, Miss Cordelia wuz an old maid in real downright earnest, same ez she'd always been one in spirit—her hair turnin' gray and her face gettin' lined and wrinkled before her time. Yit down in her soul I'm certain shore she never had got entirely reconciled and used to bein' an old maid. Somehow, there wuz a look out of her eyes that told you she wuz starvin' fur a little genuine affection in her life. Every woman is entitled to at least one romance and she'd never had hers and she wuz rebellious, I take it, at the trick that had been played on her. Ez I recall, she'd never had any beaux sparkin' round her when she wuz a little trick growin' up; she didn't even have anybody to come a-courtin' after

she come into her fortune, and that wuz a curious thing, and yit, after all, not such a curious thing neither when you think it over. Ef jest oncet some stranger had a-tried to flirt with her on the street I jedge it would a-been a sweet boon to her. She probably would a-ducked her head and run like a deer, but at any rate she could have nursed the belief always afterwards that fur one precious little minute a man had been drawn to her. But nothin' like that came to pass. And then, here three years ago this comin' summer, the romance she'd been waitin' fur all her days came into her life—and a pretty sorry sort of a romance it turned out to be too."

"I'll say it was," put in Doctor Lake, and I knew the doctor had been absorbing the slang of the newer generation. "I'll tell the world."

"Not jest yit," said Judge Priest dryly. "Let's tell this boy here about it first, and then sort of let nature take its course. Here's the way it started: One day a gentleman freely advertisin' himself to be named Christopher Columbus Gaffney and by profession to be a free-lance journalist, whutever that may be, hit this town. He let on to hail frum the city of Chicago, but it's my private opinion that a crack in the earth opened up somewheres and he crawled out frum a damp moldy hole underground. Take notice, son, frum now on, he's the official villain of the piece. 'Enter the villain!'—ez they say on the stage; only,

nearly every stage villain ever I seen was long and limber and dark-complected with coal-black hair turnin' white around the temples, thus denotin' a dissipated past. Whereas this party wuz short and fat and kind of roly-poly, with a little bitsy pursed-up mouth and a pair of little sharp eyes; and he wuz pink ez a baby in the face, and instid of black hair he hadn't scarcely no hair at all to speak of, and whut he did have wuz a sort of rusty red that sprayed out in a fringe around his scalp, with a slick bald spot in the center."

"Like a secondhand halo on a counterfeit saint," stated Doctor Lake. "Don't forget, Billy, to describe his smile while you're on the subject."

"I won't," said Judge Priest. "I wuz jest comin' to that. The smile wuz one of Christopher Columbus Gaffney Esquire's chief distinctions. It wuz, ez you might say, a chronic failin' with him—smilin' wuz. I don't know whether he took it off when he went to sleep at night, but he always wore it daytimes. You've heard, ain't you, of the look on the face of the cat that had jest et up the canary? Well, imagine the set, expectant hungry look on the face of the cat that's prowlin' round fizin' to eat the canary ez soon ez he locates it, and is smilin' fur practice in advance of the happy event, and you'll git a fairly accurate likeness of our friend frum the shores of Lake Michigan. And one or the other of those little

fat freckly hands of his wuz forever and eternally playin' at the corners of his mouth where the smile started frum."

"Show me a man that can't keep his fingers away from his mouth and I'll show you a man that's striving to hide greediness or cruelty or both," interrupted Doctor Lake. "If ever I ran across an unwholesome-looking object—why, even his fat wasn't good honest fat! You could wipe it off with a rough towel, almost. Excuse me, Billy, for breaking in on you, but when I think of that Gaffney I get red-headed myself—the conniving, colleaguing despicable, little fat—fat porpoise!"

"You must pardon this old gentleman fur his strong language," explained Judge Priest, addressing me with playful gravity. I could almost hear his eyes twinkling. "His private feelin's air involved, ez you'll be learnin' a little bit further on, and likewise he's been wounded in his professional pride. Now me, I aim to be milder and more conservative in my choice of words. In passin' I'll merely risk the assertion that in my deliberate judgment the said Gaffney got included in amongst the human family by mistake in the first place.

"Well, be that ez it may, the main p'int wuz that here he wuz, landed in our midst without bein' invited, and givin' every outward indication of settlin' down and remainin' fur quite a spell. He gave it out that he wuz compilin' data fur a history of the lower Ohio

River Valley, but the work didn't seem to be pressin' and he filled in his spare time writin' locals and pieces fur the mornin' paper. But he made it clear to everybody that he wuzn't jest an ordinary reporter or a mere newspaper man. No, suh, he wuzn't anything so mere ez that—he wuz a journalist. I jedge he wuz too. If bein' a journalist implies the use of stylish language he had his credentials right with him at all times. F'r instance, he never admitted that anybody had been buried after a funeral service; invariably deceased wuz 'suitably interred following the solemnization of impressive obsequies.' It wuz him that introduced us to 'high noon' too. Before that we'd only had two kinds of noon around here—twelve o'clock and dinnertime. In private he talked like he wrote—flowery and yit majestic and overpowerin'. And no matter whut the weather might be, he always wore a fancy vest—frequently white, but sometimes stripetty or ring speckled, and generally more or less soiled.

"I don't think he owned but one suit of clothes to his back when his native Chicago reluctantly surrendered him over to us, but he had a vest for every occasion. I used to say to myself, times when he'd come pompousin' into my court room pickin' up items, that out of the depths of Christian charity I might find it in my heart to forgive him everything else if only it hadn't abeen fur them dog-gone vests. Funny, son, ain't it, how you'll tote a special

grudge against some little thing about a feller's wardrobe, specially if you haven't been closely drawn to the feller himself?"

"Get along, Billy, can't you? I, for one, have got to be getting home sometime to-night." Doctor Lake was taking vengeance for that sideswipe of a minute or two before. "You've painted the man's portrait—and rambled all over creation doing it. The next thing is for you to tell about his getting acquainted with Miss Cordelia Bray."

"Ef you know how and when and where he first met up with her s'pose you tell it," countered Judge Priest. "All I know is that all at oncet word got noised round that our new literary light wuz attendin' the Old First Church—attendin' it regular, not only Sundays but prayer-meeting nights ez well—which natchelly made talk, him bein' a person who didn't look like he'd be frequentin' a church house without he had private motives fur so doin'. And on the heels of that came the startlin' news that he wuz actually keepin' company with Miss Cordelia Bray. Nobody seemed to know how it started; but there was the amazin' fact to speak fur itself. Just think of it: This visitin' nobleman, direct frum the great city, payin' respectful but seemin'ly devoted attentions to the richest woman in town, and her, till then, at least, belongin' to the permanently onmarried class, ez you might say—well, you could jest feel the community

rock and sway under the tidin's. He escorted her home one We'n'sday night—a dozen pairs of eager eyes watchin' 'em when he joined her at the church door comin' out, and a great swarm of clackin' tongues busy next mornin' retailin' it frum Island Creek to the Big Gulley. He set alongside of her at services the followin' Sunday mornin'—the first time in many a long day that the Bray family pew had had more'n one occupant—and 'twuz him found the place fur her in the hymnbook whilst the whole place rustled with suppressed excitement, and the Reverend Doctor Brower purty near lost the thread of his discourse, ef any such there wuz.

"He trailed in with her that evenin' fur the night preachin', her flustered and smilin' and lookin' skeered and self-conscious and yit proud and blushin'—yes, suh, actually blushin' —fully thirty reliable witnesses saw the blush and reported it promptly—and him squirin' her jest ez courtly and gallant ez ef he'd been five or six Sir Walter Raleighs rolled into one and then stomped down to about five foot seven. You had to say one thing fur him, anyway—oncet he got his campaign planned out he moved fast. Stonewall Jackson nor old Bedford Forrest never moved to the attack no prompter than whut he did—and that's about ez high a compliment ez you kin pay to speed and strategy. Ain't it, Lew? Inside of three weeks it leaked out that they wuz engaged.

By a conservative estimate I'd say fully one thousand individuals were helpin' it leak."

"Huh!" From Doctor Lake came a deep-chested grunt. "A pity that somebody didn't have the gumption to go to that poor, deluded, flattered little old spinster and warn her that all the low-flung scoundrel was after was her money!"

"The trouble wuz that them that had gumption enough to do so had too much gumption to do so," said Judge Priest, coining his epigram without, I think, meaning to do it. "Reguardless of your own private convictions you can't go, on your own hook, meddlin' in the intimate affairs of a woman old enough to be a grandmother and commonly reckined to be smart enough to handle three-quarters of a million dollars in cash and real estate. It ain't bein' done. And, even now, rememberin' whut the lamentable outcome wuz and all that, I'm prone to admit I think she wuz entitled to her pitiful little hour of happiness and triumph without let or hindrance. She wuz havin' her romance at last, even ef she wuzn't to have it fur very long. I'd not been the one to try to snatch it away frum her after her waitin' so long fur it, and neither would you, Lew Lake, fur all your indignant snortin's jest now.

"No, suh, you done like everybody else—took your feelin's out in talk. I didn't know a city the size of this here one could produce such a noble output of talk on short notice.

It wuz proof of our hidden resources. Who knew anything about the gentleman's past? Everybody asked it, nobody answered it, but nearly everybody was inclined to hope the worst. Whut on earth could she be thinkin' of—trustin' herself and all that wealth to a stranger? And jest look at the difference in their ages! There wuz no need, though, fur this last suggestion—the lookin' wuz already bein' conducted on a general scale. He might pass fur forty, or even fur thirty-five in a poor light amongst nearsighted people. But she'd never see her fiftieth birthday ag'in without she peered backward over her shoulder. In a big town, whut with paint and hairdressin' and youngish clothes, she might fool a few, but not here, where she wuz born and brought up. We had amongst us too many official historians with good memories—mainly of the gentler sex. 'Let's see, now—she was putting her hair up the year my nephew Harry fell out of the cherry tree and broke his right arm in two places, and he was going on nine then, because he was eighteen when the Spanish American War broke out, because I remember how set he was on enlisting and how his mother carried on—yes, she's fifty-one if she's a day.'"

I had to laugh. The old judge's mimicry of Mrs. Puss Whitley, our most efficient and painstaking gossip, was a little bit of perfection. He slipped back into his own purposely ungrammatical fashion of speech:

"Yes, suzz, there wuz indeed consider'ble talk. There were people who swore they'd go to that weddin' ef they had to git up out of a sick bed to do it and crawl there on their hands and knees. But here's where a large number of our citizens suffered a most grievous blow. Because them two slipped off down to Dyersburg and wuz married without anybody knowin' anything about it in advance. There wuz a feelin' that an unfair advantage had been took on the populace at large. And then, as though to arouse popular disappointment to a still higher pitch, they went off on a honeymoon and wuz gone all of two months."

"Aren't you overlooking one important detail?" suggested Doctor Lake.

"No, I ain't; I'm jest gittin' to that. Here's whut Doctor Lake means, son: Before they eloped thataway they entered into whut us lawyers call a prenuptial arrangement. Unbeknownst to anybody they went down to Dabney Prentiss' office and had Dabney Prentiss draw up their wills fur them. On the face of it, ef you didn't know the respective circumstances of the contractin' pair, you'd a-said 'twuz a fair deal. Ef he died first everything he owned went to her. Ef she died first everything she owned went to him, with the exception of a few private bequests here and there; but in the event of her outlivin' him and dyin' without issue the bulk of her estate wuz to be devoted to erectin' and maintainin' a public

hospital ez a memorial to her father. I'm inclined to think this here last provision—fur the hospital—wuz the only part of her last will and testament that Miss Cordelia had any actual hand in dictatin'. Probably it soothed away any lingerin' suspicions she might have had that her adorin' lover wuz nursin' mercenary motives in the back part of his head, when he fell in so prompt with her notion of doin' somethin' on a big scale to redeem her daddy's reputation in this community. I kin almost see him settin' alongside her on a sofa out yonder at the old Grundy place holdin' her withered, flutterin' little hand in his and agreein' with her that the idea of the Humphrey Bray Memorial Hospital wuz a perfectly splendid idea and an everlastin' credit to her.

"But the kernel in the nut wuz that she had to outlive him to carry out her ambition. Doubtless it never occurred to her that ef he died first about all she'd inherit would be mebbe a pair of moss-agate cuff buttons and his collection of fancy vests; whereas, on the other hand, ef she wuz the first to pass away he'd come into one of the biggest fortunes in this end of the state of Kintucky. Bein' swept off her feet the way she plainly wuz, she doubtless couldn't see any selfish motive lurkin' behind his little proposition. It must a-been his proposition; we kin lay bets on that. And it wasn't Dabney Prentiss' place to point out to her that the thing didn't perzackly track square.

Ez an attorney it wuz his place to make the papers legal and shipshape and keep his mouth shut. Anyway, him bein' a lawyer, I figger that all the time he wuz settin' at his desk draftin' them two interestin' documents he wuz renderin' to the prospective bridegroom the tribute of a sneakin' and begrudged admiration fur his financial sagacity. Leavin' out any discussion ez to his soul, it's not to be denied that this here Christopher Columbus Gaffney had a good business head on his shoulders."

"And a heart as black as the underneath side of a skillet," interjected Doctor Lake.

"Figgerin' out the state of a party's vital organs is part of Doctor Lake's trade," remarked Judge Priest blandly, as though speaking for my benefit solely; "so I reckin us two better not quarrel with his diagnosis in this case, but jest go ahead with our yarn.

"Two months the happy pair wuz off in Eastern parts on their bridal tour. And they wuz, indeed, a happy pair when they got back, ef ever I seen one. The distinguished husband wuz happy in the possession of a most ornate and picturesque wardrobe which he'd amassed in the great marts of fashion whilst on his travels, and happy in havin' onlimited cash money in his pocket, and in his plans fur remodelin' the old Grundy place and makin' it over into whut he called a country estate, and fur buyin' himself a high-powered touring car right away, and fur first one thing and then another.

'Twould appear he'd returned to us with quite an elaborate spendin' campaign already mapped out.

"And his lady wuz happy in her proud estate of wifehood—so happy she couldn't see a single flaw in him anywhere; and that only goes to show true love is not only blind but frequently half-witted, also, seein' that here she wuz, visitin' her idolatrous worship upon a hero who, to the observant eye, appeared to be made up of probably the most conspicuous and outstandin' collection of flaws that's been consolidated together in one package durin' the entire Christian Era. But to her he wuz jest absolute perfection. She showed it by the way she looked at him, by the way she spoke to him and about him, by every breath she drawed and every step she took. She couldn't see yit—in time, of course, she would, but so fur she couldn't—whut immediately wuz painfully apparent to every well-wisher she had, which wuz that even this soon he wuz speakin' of her behind her back with the early beginnin's of a sneer, not more'n half tryin' to hid his contempt fur her lack of good looks and her gawkiness and her poor, distressful attempts to make herself purtified and youthful in the new clothes she'd brought home with her. She didn't know that already he wuz braggin', ez he spent her dollars over Link Seever's bar and in Andy Hooker's crap game, how easy it wuz to git onlimited funds out of her. He'd es-

tablished his connections with Andy's layout before he'd been back two weeks; but she didn't know it. It wuz the mercy of God she never did know.

"It may have been a fool's paradise she lived in fur the little time she wuz to live, but I'm mighty glad for her sake that she had it, and that disillusionment didn't come to spile it fur her during them last three months or so before she had her stroke."

He gave a little wheezy sigh. He scratched his match to relight his pipe and for a moment or two his old face, pink and wrinkled and compassionate, showed in flashes as the little suck of flame flared up, then down.

"Well, Lew," he said, "it's your turn to piece out the tale. Try not to be too technical fur the understandin's of us laymen."

"Billy just mentioned a stroke," said Doctor Lake. "It came without warning, so far as anyone ever knew—came on her one night as she was getting ready for bed. Bilateral hemiplegia, it was; probably with cerebral tumorous complications; a typical case; you'd call it paralysis. It was complete, too—not partial as the first attack frequently is. Arms, legs, body, face were all involved, all stilled and deadened in an hour. Only her eyes lived. It was the expression of her eyes that proved she still had consciousness. She couldn't speak, of course; couldn't move. She was merely a living spirit imprisoned in a dead body. She wasn't even

so lucky as that other paralytic, that character in The Count of Monte Christo, who talked with his eyelids while his frozen tongue lay behind his frozen lips.

"There was no chance for her, naturally—that is to say, no chance for her betterment. There was really nothing medical science could do except provide for proper nourishment and proper nursing and be on the guard against bed sores. Even so, there was a possibility that she might linger on for months—might even last in that state for years.

"And he knew it—that dog of a husband of hers knew it—and didn't want this to be. He wanted her to die, and die quickly. He tried to mask his feelings, but the rôle was one his master, the devil, never meant for him to play. Behind his transparent efforts to appear grief-stricken, behind his faked and futile display of a sudden and devastating grief, behind his loud lamentations, what really was in his heart showed plainly enough for any observer to see. It showed in the look out of his greedy, cowardly little pig eyes, it showed in the way his hand—with big rings on it now, rings of her buying—played around his mouth. Most of all it showed in the questions he kept asking the medical men who'd been called in, and the nurse who'd been put on the case.

"Why, you could read his mind as plainly as though he had bared it to you in a sworn and signed affidavit. No doubt he'd calculated, in

the natural course of things, to outlive her. His expectations of doing that were good; he had the advantage of ten or fifteen years' difference in age on his side. But he had reconciled himself to the prospect of a long endurance test—of putting up with life with her and with life in this town for years perhaps. His current recompense while she lived would be the spending of what he could get out of her, and in the end his reward would be a fortune that would be his to do with as he pleased. But that meant patience, it meant a waiting game. By his standards it meant dullness and being bored and annoyed and irked by her presence. And now, then, she had been stricken down; was already the same as a dead woman. Why couldn't she have the decency to die then and leave him free—free to go on back where he came from and squander his legacy in what way he chose? No need for him to utter the thought aloud; he uttered it all the louder for keeping it locked in his brain. Merely as a study in degeneracy it's interesting to observe the workings of that sort of mentality. That is to say, it would be interesting if it weren't so nauseating; if only the observer could bury his natural instincts to destroy such a worm in the psychological aspects of the case.

"If wishes could kill she'd have died a hundred times a day, I'll warrant you. From his perverted standpoint the situation was decidedly aggravating, I'll admit. Between him and his capital prize there stood only a faint flicker-

ing spark to be snuffed out—but the trouble was he didn't have the courage to snuff it out by his own deliberate act. He had the impulses, all right, but he lacked the nerve which a murderer has. At least, that's the way I appraised his qualifications. As a matter of personal taste, I believe, on the whole, I'd have a higher respect for a man willing to commit murder to gain his object than for the one who thinks murder and dreams murder and craves murder, yet can't force his craven hands to tackle the job.

"He lacked something else besides the nerve, too—he lacked the opportunity. And here's where the old woman, Aunt Jurdina, that Judge Priest mentioned a while back, comes into the picture. That old creature—and a rough-talking, high-tempered old piece she was too—had been a fixture of the Bray household for fully fifty years or more, I guess. She was one of the old-fashioned, faithful type that are pretty nearly extinct these days. She'd nursed Miss Cordelia as a baby; she'd mothered her on up through her childhood. And if there was one person on this earth who loved her with an unselfish, unquestioning love it was this selfsame old Aunt Jurdina. There was a trained nurse in attendance, as I said just now; a competent one, too, but really she wasn't needed. Nobody knew just when that old black woman slept; there was hardly a minute, day or night, from the time the patient was stricken down, when

she didn't seem to be at the bedside studying her mistress' face out of those brooding, sullen, bloodshot eyes of hers; tending her, feeding her, sometimes singing to her—singing one of those curious, crooning, wordless songs that these old-time darkies favor—but more often just crouched there by the bed, silent and watchful. Watchfulness! That's the word that sums up her attitude. Whatever it was she had at the back of her head—dread or suspicion or fear—she showed it only by that vigilant posture of hers. She never voiced it in words. But let anybody at all—even one of the doctors or the nurse—come near the bedside, and old Jurdina never took her hostile gaze off of them, whoever it was. Small chance for Gaffney to work any mischief with that old terror on guard, even if he'd had the will to screw himself up to the sticking point!

"Well, this sort of thing went on for two weeks or more, with the sick woman lying there like a statue, with the old negress forever standing ward over her, with Gaffney eternally hangdogging about, hoping and fearing and—as it turned out—scheming. One morning when his plans had ripened he showed his hand. He wasn't satisfied with the treatment his poor dear wife was getting; that's what he came out and said. The intimation plainly was that he doubted the ability and the skill of resident physicians to handle the case. I think he used the words 'country doctors.' He had decided

—he, mind you, this cheap little adventurer—he had decided to call in an eminent specialist of his acquaintance from Chicago, a certain Doctor Champion, who had achieved wonderful results in the treatment of paralysis by an electrical method of his own devising. In fact, he had already wired to Doctor Champion and had an answer back. Doctor Champion would arrive by the evening train, bringing his own expert nurse with him. He had said, though, in his telegram that he must have absolutely a free hand in his handling of the invalid; by all accounts Doctor Champion stood for no interference by lesser men of the profession—the patient must be turned over entirely to this miracle man. And so, would the local practitioners kindly be prepared to step down and out when Doctor Champion arrived? Or words to that general effect.

"Well, the local practitioners didn't wait for night and Doctor Champion to come. They just reached for their hats and got right out then and there."

"You mean they quit the case knowing, or thinking they knew, what was in that man's mind?" I asked.

"What was there for them to do?" he answered grimly. "There's such a thing as professional etiquette in our calling, and in any calling there should be such a thing as self-respect. What else? The woman's husband, her legal next of kin and the head of the

house, as good as invited them to step out from under its roof. They might think what they pleased of his private motives, but by every recognized law he had the final say-so. Just consider for a moment how well fortified in his position he was. Even if the outcome was fatal to his wife he could plead solicitude, zeal, husbandly affection. And if it came to a showdown, wouldn't the world have to accept his decision as an honest one? Private opinion based on surmise, on suspicion, on personal prejudice and personal dislike, is one thing; evidence fit for a jury is another, as you'll agree. Besides, these home doctors knew one thing for certain—they knew that, come hell or high water, Gaffney would never get rid of old Jurdina by any method short of killing her outright. She'd stick right there on the job; they could rest assured of that. Anyhow, she was as good a nurse as you'd ask for, even if she couldn't read or write her own name. And in the last analysis, nursing was really all that the patient needed; practically all, for the time being, anyone could give her. So they packed up their little kits and they got out and left the field to the great man from Chicago.

"He rolled in at six that evening with his cabinet of tricks and his beautiful life-size side whiskers and his own nurse and all—and a fine large picture of a charlatan and a poser he was; hiding monumental ignorance under a

nice thick covering of dignity and assurance. Or at least that's what I decided in my own mind the only time I ever saw him and talked with him, which was several days later. Gaffney was waiting for him at the train and hurried him out to the house, and in half an hour after they got there the wizard had his conjuring box all rigged up and was in sole charge.

"Afterwards certain people here learned certain things about him. I rather took it on myself to make a few private inquiries. Probably it was none of my business, but I had a curiosity and I took steps to gratify it. The man had always been a sort of hanger-on at the ragged edges of the profession; not exactly disreputable, you understand, and yet, measured by the ethics, not exactly reputable, either. Years back he'd advertised to reduce ruptures without an operation, guaranteeing a cure or your money back—you know the sort. When that line petered out on him he set up as a cancer specialist, and more recently he'd switched again and was professing to cure pretty nearly everything, but especially palsy and epilepsy and paralysis, by some sort of electrical penny peep-show. These, briefly, appeared to have been the high lights in his career. He was, I figure, just an ignorant, greedy pretender, trading on the credulity of the hopelessly afflicted and the hopelessly crippled. Mind you, though, I don't say, even so, that he was a conscious criminal. There was no

record of his ever having been accused outright of malpractice or anything of that nature. Indeed, I'm inclined to think that he had his moments of sincerity, when he really and honestly believed he was doing good—he was probably ignorant enough even to have confidence in himself. And certainly outright murder was not his specialty."

"But I gathered that you rather inferred Gaffney brought him down here with the idea of making an actual co-conspirator of him?" I said.

"Then you gathered wrong. That wasn't my meaning at all. Here's how I reason it out: I imagine that Gaffney must have known him long before this. They'd naturally be drawn to each other if ever they'd met, each being in his particular field a sort of shabby adventurer. You know the saying: 'Birds of a feather——' And Gaffney had a sort of low animal cunning, as I've tried to make you see. No doubt he had read through Champion's pretensions; no doubt he'd figured him out to be an impostor of sorts at the least. Well, with an incompetent and a bungler on the job, wasn't there a pretty fair prospect that the stricken woman, already as good as dead, might be got out of the world sooner than would be the case if responsible men were in attendance? Her life hung by a thread. If this faker, with his hocus-pocus, should unwittingly snap the thread in short order, who could show even a

color of deliberate intent on the part of either one of them? Or maybe it was that Gaffney wanted no potentially hostile witnesses about —that is, assuming he was contemplating actual violence himself. Still, I'm inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt and assume, for the sake of argument, that he depended on stupidity and quackery and perhaps unintentional neglect to do the trick."

"But how about this old black woman?" I asked. "Surely you wouldn't call her a friendly witness? Why didn't he get rid of her when he was getting rid of the others?"

"Remember this, son," said Doctor Lake: "Gaffney was a Northerner. He didn't know her race. He'd be likely to figure that all this show of electrical mummery and all those high-sounding long words which Champion used would deceive her into accepting him as a great man who might be able to save the patient. I'm not saying she mightn't have been deceived, either, if only her apprehensions hadn't been sharpened by her love for her mistress—and by other things she'd noticed. And, in any event, he couldn't shelve her without a pitched battle, no matter how much he might want to do it. Ethics meant nothing to her. She was her own code of ethics and, as I told you just now, yoked oxen couldn't have dragged her away from her post. So he just let her stay; he had to, that's all.

"Never mind about that, though, for the

moment. I'll get along to the next real development. The very next afternoon after Champion appeared on the scene Gaffney himself was taken ill with gripes in his abdomen—suddenly and violently and painfully ill. His eminent friend, the imported specialist, said it was an attack of acute nervous indigestion brought on by distress over his wife's condition, and gave him a treatment—an electrical treatment, I suppose—and put him to bed. Nervous indigestion—bah! Any six months' medical student should have known better.

"For a whole night and well on into the next day he lay there suffering the agonies of the damned—and only this pet faker of his to attend him. He must have had a premonition—people very often do when they're like that. Oh, I guess he knew—he must have known; he could feel Nemesis taking hold of his vitals. We can imagine his sensations; he was no fool. By his own trick and device he'd delivered himself into the perilous keeping of a man that he knew was an ignoramus and a charlatan. I can almost see him—writhing and tearing at the bedclothes when the pains gripped him, and between spasms tortured by thoughts of the fix he'd got into. He'd dug a deep pit for another—and had fallen to the bottom of it himself.

"And on that second day of his illness, getting worse all the time, he—— But here,

Billy, you take up the story from now on. The next chapter is yours by rights anyway."

And the old judge took it up:

"It wuz the next day, ez Lew sez, about four o'clock in the evenin', that he managed to git up out of bed—he wuz in a room on the top floor of the house—and drag himself through the hall and git down the stairs. How he done it, in the fix he wuz in, is a marvel. Mebbe desperation and skeer give him an onnatchel strength. Anyhow, he didn't have to come all the way down the stairs—he crawled part way and rolled the rest. Layin' there at the foot of the steps moanin' and whimperin', wuz where old Jurdina found him.

"It happened she wuz alone fur the time bein', settin' alongside Miss Cordelia in the big bedroom on the main floor, and she heared him when he tumbled, and then she heard his groans and she went out in the hall to investigate, and there he wuz. She went up to him and stood over him, with her hands on her bony old hip joints, lookin' down at him and not no more compassion in her face than whut you'd expect to find in one of these here African idols.

"'Whut you want?' she sez to him.

"'You,' he managed to gasp; 'I want you.'

"'Whut you want wid me?'

"'I want you to help me,' he sez. 'I tried to get to the telephone,' he sez, 'but I fell—I couldn't make it. But you'll do.'

"'Do whut?'

"'Get me a doctor,' he sez. 'I must have a doctor right away!'

"'Whut's de matter wid dis yere high-toney doctor you done fotch on f'um de Nawth?' she sez. 'Ain't he right yere on de premises handy to yo' beck an' call?'

"'But I want some other doctor,' he sez, pleadin' hard. 'I want one of the doctors that we had here last week—both of them, if they'll come. I tell you I need help.'

"'You done turn dem doctors off,' she sez.

"'But I want 'em called back in,' he sez; and by now he's cryin' in a kind of a weak, whisperin', pantin' way. 'I'm awfully sick,' he sez. 'I tell you I'm a terribly sick man. There's something frightfully wrong with my side here.'

"'An' how 'bout my Li'l Miss?' she sez. 'Ain't she turr'ble bad off too? Ef dat Chicago man is fitten to 'tend her all alone by hisse'f, howcome he ain't fitten to 'tend you? Tell me dat.'

"'But I'm sick in a different way,' he sez; 'you don't understand. Oh, for God's sake,' he sez, 'don't stand there tormenting me with questions! Do something to help me!'

"'Oh, yas, I does un'erstand,' she sez, and with that she stoops down alongside him so that her blazin' eyes air glarin' right into his, and her words come frum her hissin' hot. 'Oh, yas, I does un'erstand, Mister Mealy-mouf

Man. I un'erstood frum de fust minute ever you set foot inside dat frunt door yonder, five months ago. You could fool my Li'l' Miss—you could fool other folkses. But not me! An' I un'erstands now. An' it's high time you un'erstood me. Lissen: You done med de nest—you gwine lie in it. Whut's good 'nuff fur my Li'l' Miss is good 'nuff fur you. Whut she's got to tek, you teks too. Whut she gits, you git; only ef I'm ary jedge, you gits yourn fust an' you gits it quick.'

"She wuz readin' him his death warrant and he knew it, and he tried to shove her away from him and git up. She shoved him back.

"'Lay still an' lissen to me,' she sez. 'You know whut I'm gwine do? I'm gwine tek you in dese two arms of mine an' I'm gwine tote you back up dem steps an' put you in yo' baid in dat room w'ich you jes' left, an' dar you gwine stay, effen I has to stand at de do' an' bar de way. An' ef I cain't be dere on guard, my husband Silas, he'll be dere in my place, an' ef he stirs f'um dere, ur lets you stir, I'll skin him alive, an' he knows it. Try to git to de telefome—jes' try,' she sez, tauntin' him. 'Try to yell fur help outen de winder effen you wants to—'tain't nobody gwine heah you an' 'tain't nobody gwine heed you; dey's ten acres of ground round dis place, an' yo' voice is departin' f'um you mouty fast.'

"It must have been jest about then that he fainted away, because the only sound he

made ez she heaved him up and drug him back upstairs wuz by his feet bumpin' on the steps. And frum then on it seems he wuz never more than half conscious; plumb out of his head when he wuzn't layin' in a stupor-like. I reckin her words had been enough to drive him out of his wits anyway, weak ez he wuz. She wuz enough to drive him out of 'em. I bet you the original Jezebel couldn't a-been a more furious sight or a more dauntin' one than whut she wuz ez she squatted down there by him in that old dark hall, spittin' out the sentence that spelled his doom fur him."

"It was his finish, then?" I asked.

"It wuz his finish," answered Judge Priest soberly.

"How soon after that did he die?" I pressed.

"Oh, not right away; not till the next night. But I'll let Lew supply you the details of his finish. It's more properly his job."

"Might have been my job, you mean," said Doctor Lake crisply. "I got there in a hurry about dusk of the following evening, answering to an emergency call. One look at him and I realized there was nothing I could do—acute appendicitis of the fulminating type. He was moribund by then, and past helping. He must have been sinking fast all through that day and he was just about gone. No use to try doing anything, and I knew it. Still, a man hates to quit. I had 'em rig up a kitchen table and I laid out my instruments, but he

flickered out while I was getting ready to etherize him.

"Taken in time, he could have been saved, and would have been. Organically he was sound, and he was strong, too—he proved how strong he was by lasting as long as he did with all that poison spreading inside of him. A prompt operation at the outset, or even an operation twenty-four or thirty-six hours earlier, before his appendix burst, and he'd have been alive today. I'm certain of that. But he isn't —thanks to that old black woman."

"Did she finally relent? Was it she who sent for you?" I asked.

"She relent? Not a chance! It was the eminent Doctor Champion himself who sent for me most urgently. The man got frightened. Even he could see—when it was too late—that Gaffney was dying. And anyhow, I suppose he had a trace of a conscience concealed somewhere inside of him—rudimentary, perhaps, but still a trace. So he called me up and begged me to come. I could tell by his voice over the telephone that he was in a blue funk of panic. It was neither human nor professional for me to refuse to go. So I went, and I stayed on, as it happened. Because he got out—gathered up his batteries and dynamos and things, and took his nurse with him and pulled out. He'd had one patient die on his hands; it was plain to be seen he didn't want another doing the same thing. So the late Mr. Gaffney

was buried next morning in the Bray family lot out at Elm Grove Cemetery, and just two weeks later his wife followed him there.

"And now you know all the whys and wherefores of that fine big memorial hospital you saw dedicated today. And it's time I was getting along home to bed. We've been palavering away here too long as it is." He rose up from his chair.

"There's just one point that still isn't clear in my mind," I said. "I can understand, Doctor Lake, why you knew at first hand the things you've been telling me—you must have been one of the two physicians that had Miss Cordelia's case at the start; that's plain enough. But, Judge Priest, I don't quite see how you came to know part of what you've been telling me. For instance now, take your description of the scene between Gaffney and old Aunt Jurdina, after he fell down the stairs and she——"

"Oh, that?" said the judge. "Why, she told me about it."

"She?"

"Yes, shorely—old Jurdina told me. Where else could I 'a'-got the straight of it but frum her? You see, son, fur some reason or other, there's quite a passel of people in this town who come to me frum time to time when I'm not settin' on the bench, and tell me things that ain't exactly in the line of my judicial duties. It's got to be a kind of a habit with

some of 'em round here. I don't know why it is, but such is the case. Moreover, in this instance, I'd knowed old Jurdina fur goin' on fully fifty years, I reckin, and then besides, right soon after her mistress died she'd come to me instid of goin' to a practicin' lawyer, ez she should, to ask me some questions about her legacy. By the terms of the will she and old Silas come in fur a nice little sheer of money and a comfortable house to live in. So I jedge she felt that she wuz entitled to bestow her confidences on me; and here about ten months ago, when she come to die herself, she sent a messenger to me sayin' that she had something mighty important to say to me fur the peace of her soul and would I please come right away. So when court had adjourned that evenin' I went out there to the little cottage on Harrison Street where she lived. And after they'd propped her up on a pillow and when, at her request, I'd shooed all the other darkies out of the room, she told me this thing about her farewell dealin's with the late Gaffney, in jest about the words I've used in tryin' to tell it to you. You might call it a deathbed confession, because that's practically whut it wuz.

"But don't misunderstand me and go away frum here thinkin' that she had any regrets fur the part she'd played in the matter. No, suh, not that old woman! There wuzn't a regret in her system. Right up to the last breath she drawed, she gloried in it. It's hard

sometimes, even fur us that've lived all our lives amongst these black folks, to fathom the workin's of their minds, but ez a matter of fact I'm inclined to think it wuz a sort of pride that made her send fur me when she realized she wuz about due to pass away. And pride is no kin to remorse. You see, son, she really believed she'd killed Gaffney. Mebbe she had, too—Lew, here, seems to think she contributed to the result, jedgin' by his remark of a minute or so ago—but that wuzn't the sense in which she meant it. She thought she'd had a direct hand in his takin' off. And I figger she didn't want to go without intrustin' her precious secret to somebody who'd carry on the memory of it. So she picked on me. Yes, suh, she wuz firmly convinced, that old woman, that she'd been directly responsible fur his death, and ef I'm pressed I'll have to admit I didn't try to tell her no better, either. Appendicitis didn't mean a thing to her—to her it wuz merely an effect and not a cause. No, her firm conviction wuz that she'd had him put to death by hoodoo."

There was a scuffling of feet behind me and I became aware of Jeff Poindexter. Listening to the two old men, I had altogether forgotten that Jeff was still present. He stepped nimbly backward and fumbled at the jamb of the front door. An electric bulb set in the porch ceiling flashed on, flooding the spot where we sat with radiance.

"Who turned on that there light?" demanded Judge Priest querulously.

"Me, suh—I done it," said Jeff, and it struck me there was a quick and nervous quaver in his voice. "Hit seemed lak, wid the moon goin' down, 'twould—'twould—er—be gittin' kinder dark out yere fur you gen'l'men."

"Well, turn it off again," said his master. "Whut you want to do—draw all the mosquitoes in the county?"

Jeff obeyed, but I observed that he was now withdrawn well inside the door. There was a small light in the hall.

Judge Priest went on as though he had not noted this byplay: "Yes, suzz, that wuz it—she thought she'd done it by havin' him witched to death. Propped up there in her bed, ashy gray and breathin' so loud she sounded like a leaky bellows, she told me about it. It seemed whilst Gaffney wuz plottin' agin her mistress she'd been plottin' agin him. She hated him with an onquenchable hate to begin with. Then after Miss Cordelia wuz stricken down she'd read his true feelin's the same ez Doctor Lake and Doctor Boyd, his associate on the case, had read 'em. So she put off to old Daddy Hannah. You'll remember him—the old nigger conjure-doctor that used to live out yonder in that darky settlement on Plunkett's Hill. She found him in his cabin and she told him—not namin' any names though—that she aimed to put a deadly spell on a deadly enemy. So

he told her, she said, to manage to git holt of a lock of hair out of the candidate's head some way or other and fetch it there to him. Which she did. She bided her chance and she slipped into Gaffney's room when he wuzn't there and she collected some little red wisps out of a fine-tooth comb he used, and taken 'em back to old Daddy Hannah. And he said some conjure words over that wad of hair and then he tied it up in a little piece of blue cotton rag along with a white rooster feather that had been dipped in blood, and a dried frog's leg, and one thing and another, and he told her, she said, to take it back home with her and bore an auger hole in a growin' tree close to where her enemy lived and stick the charm in the hole and seal it up with a plug. He told her that inside of a month the tree would wither and die and the man that'd owned the hair would die along with it. He charged her twenty dollars fur his professional services; she payin' it gladly and reguardin' it ez reasonable at the price.

"So she went home and she followed after his instructions. She stuck the rag in a hole she made in a big sycamore standin' in the yard close up to the main house, and then she settled back, waitin' fur results. She didn't have long to wait. So fur ez Gaffney wuz concerned, she and Daddy Hannah wuz ten days ahead of their schedule. Fur Gaffney wuz dead and buried in jest twenty-one days; she kept

close track. Of course it wuz jest a coincidence, but nobody could have convinced her of that. And she died happy in the belief that she'd sent him where he's gone to.

"Curious thing, there wuz another coincidence, too—an even more strikin' and remarkable one," added Judge Priest musingly, and although I could not see his face a whimsical undernote in his voice told me that for sufficient reasons he was now departing from the strict truth and drawing on his fancy. "I asked her about the sycamore tree and, believe it or not, she gave me her solemn, dyin' word that frum the very hour he sickened, the leaves on that tree begun to fade and wither, and that——"

He was interrupted by a scurry of quick retreating footsteps behind him; then we heard the sound of a door slamming somewhere at the back of the house; and by these things we knew that Jeff Poindexter, for once forgetting his manners and the proprieties of the occasion, had summarily and suddenly quit the company.

CHAPTER IV

RED-HANDED

ACROSS a yellow creek ran a covered bridge perhaps two hundred and fifty feet long. The street narrowed where it met the bridge at its western end and broadened out again where it took up at the bridge's other mouth; but soon thereafter, as though depleted by the effort of getting over the hollow of the roiled stream, it lost all character of a street and frankly became a sand road, weaving off through the piney flats.

The bridge was built of wood, old but sound. Along its middle breadth even in broad day it was dark, almost, as a tunnel. There were small windows, set like square portholes high up and just under the pitched angles of the roof, but their panes were so dirty and so coated over with cobwebbing that they let in no light at all, and the loose ends of the cobwebs so thickened with dust and so fuzzy with hayseeds that they dangled down straight and stiff, like weighted top strings. Such sunshine as got into the center span at all came in by cran-

nies overhead, where from age and weathering the shingles were racked apart, and it made sliced dapplings, like slits and slots, on the worn boards of the underfooting. This being the nesting season, the barn swallows made soft whirring sounds with their wings as they went in and out of their dry-plastered homes under the rafters. At one place the 'dobe houses of the birds studded the side walls in an effect of a primitive mural decoration.

Just here, where the gloom was nice and thick, Solitaire waited for his man. He had been waiting for him for nearly half an hour now, hidden behind one of the big square timbers that carried the upper works of the bridge. Where he was, he was excellently well sheltered. A person coming from the east to traverse the bridge had no chance to see him until abreast of him, if then. A person coming from the other direction might possibly see him, if that person traveled afoot and slowly and had very keen eyesight, or if Solitaire should move. He took due care not to move.

In this time while he waited, three pedestrians, all east bound, went right on by him with no sign on the part of any one of them of recognition of his presence, and a team and wagon rumbled through, making a tremendous clatter in that pent-in place and squeezing spurts of dust from between the floor planks. In his ambush back of the support for the superstructure Solitaire felt quite safe. Better lighting

would have revealed him, though, as an alien and a suspicious figure for these present surroundings. Realizing this, he was grateful for his artificial gloaming.

Because Solitaire nearly always played a lone hand he was Solitaire. All things considered, he found in the long run that it paid better. If, on the one hand, he took all the risk, on the other hand, he took all the profits out of an undertaking. When the job was finished there was nobody to claim a split with him nor did he run in the danger that somebody might talk too much. This was his way and, owing to it, he almost had lost the name he had been born with, which was Smith.

But in the matter in hand he had, by press of circumstances, been forced to break the rule and take on a partnership. Even so, he retained the captaincy, holding command of the major performance and playing the major rôle. In the jargon of the calling he was the Get-'em-up Guy. Five years ago the trade term for him would have been Stick-up; but crook language changes fast to match the changes of the times and the seasons. Upon him largely depended the success or failure of the major operation.

Still, and too, the duties of his associates carried responsibilities with them. Feary had their small swift new car halted, in readiness with the engine running, a hundred feet from the west entrance of the bridge. His task

would be to cover the retreat, with gun fire if necessary, and afterwards to take Solitaire and himself away from there at fast flight. He was one of the Hard Boiled People, or by an argot now almost obsolete, a yeggman, bald in his craftsmanship but crudely efficient. His work, like Solitaire's, lay ahead of him. But the Sweet Caps Kid already had done his share. For two months now he had been upon the ground, establishing his connections, spying out the lay of the land, generally getting the hang and the swing of local things. This had taken time, entailing also upon him a spell of uncongenial manual labor; nevertheless, and smothering his distaste for bread earned in the sweat of the brow, he had done his part well.

So both the others voted when, they having arrived, he made his reports to them separately. Feary, two days earlier, had come in overland, driving the car. Solitaire had traveled down by train from Richmond, which was the nearest large city, and had rented a room in a cheap boarding house. Feary was lodged elsewhere, and Sweet Caps yet further away than either of them. It was desirable that in all preliminary measures they must seem to be as strangers to one another. It not only was desirable, — it was most essential. Their one joint meeting had taken place the night before. To the conference the conferees had come by different ways, walking guardedly. The place of their meeting was a disused cotton gin at the

end of the short side street whereon Solitaire temporarily was domiciled.

Beforehand, when the project was framed, the terms of division had been arrived at. For having, in the first place, smelled out the prospect Solitaire was to have a fourth; he also would be entitled to a second quarter share for his actual part in the operation. As the money-eyed member of the firm he had from his own pocket provided funds for prior expenses. Out of his fifty percent he would reimburse himself for such outlays. The remaining fifty percent would go to Feary and the Sweet Caps Kid, cut even ways between the two of them.

So, at the rendezvous, there was no need for further discussion of financial details. Nor was there need for rehearsing, excepting most briefly, the steps previously taken, nor the somewhat unusual conditions which had brought the three so far from the Big Town for this venture. Regarding this last they already knew all there was to know. It was Solitaire who had nosed the knowledge out.

The situation here was this: The Tuckahominy Mills, the second largest textile plant of private ownership in the South, had lately, by reason of a death and a deathbed request, come into the possession of new proprietors. The original founder of the business had, in his last will, devised that a goodish sum in surplus profits should proportionately be divided among such of his employees as had served him for a

stated length of time, or longer. One group of his legatees was content to abide by this decree. But there was a second group who opposed it, proclaiming undue influences on a failing and moribund mind in the final hours of their kinsman.

In this issue and on this point litigation and yet more litigation had followed. With other arguments, the contestants advanced the claim that no individual in his right faculties conceivably could have desired to bestow so unreasonably large a benefaction upon workers hired at current top wages and abundantly paid for their past labors. They pointed out that in the active life of the decedent there had been no provable act or word which would indicate in him the forming of so generous and so irrational an impulse. But the high judges ruled that the will was good and the will must stand. By order of court the money, on or before specified dates, must be distributed in specie and currency—for so the testator expressly had required—to the eleven hundred and odd operatives competent to share in it. The total, or any considerable part of the total, made a delectable beautiful stream.

The purpose, therefore, of the federated three in caucus this night in the abandoned cotton gin at the foot of Solitaire's street, was to divert this golden, green-backed bonus out of its ordained courses into a private channel of their own providing.

The Sweet Caps Kid was speaking, his jubilance seeking to lift his note, his instinct for caution striving to hold him to undertones. So his voice ran curiously up and down:

"Now, here's the plant just like I gets it: The regular paymaster of the company is supposed to be bringin' the jack down on the train that gets in at three-forty. Well, the jack will be on the same train, all right, alrighty, but he won't have it on him. Get what I mean? The paymaster'll have a couple of private bulls along with him for a bodyguard, same as they've been doin' here ever since the Ballard mob throwed a scare into these folks six weeks ago with that post office job over at Vanceton, which is in the next county to this one; and he'll have a leather money satchel hitched on to him by a chain locked round his waist, as per usual. And him and his two bulls will get in a car together at the depot and ride up the main street and over the big iron bridge, goin' straight to the mills. But all he'll have in his little keister will be a few hundreds in loose silver—for change when a mill hand's bit don't run to even money. Get me?

"But here's the right dope: While he's gettin' off the train on the side next to the depot another guy will be climbin' off on the other side. My info is that he'll be in jumpers or overalls, like a guy finishin' off a day's work somewheres up the line and on his way back home. Anyways, he'll be carryin' the real bunch

of jack—the important money. Maybe it'll just be tied up in a paper bundle like an extra shirt or maybe it'll be hid inside his lunch pail —dinner bucket's what these hicks down here would call it. I ain't right sure on that point, but anyways it's dead certain to be one or the other of these two ways. All of it bein' in bills, it'll fold up nice and snug.

"Well, while the three guys with the phony roll are on their way to the front office of the mill, the guy with the big jack will be ramblin' away from the depot, swingin' north, and he'll cross over by the old covered bridge that you already know about—the one that's half a mile upstream from the iron bridge. Thinkin' that nobody's noticin' him, he'll head for the mill, meanin' to get in by the back door alongside the creek—river, they call it here.

"But he won't never get there—not with his bundle, anyways! These wisenheimers that run this dump think they're makin' it sweet and easy for themselves when all the time they're only makin' it sweeter and easier for us. First place, bein' a Saturday, it's the regular payday for the hands and they'd all be at the mill waitin' for their time even if there wasn't a special attraction to keep 'em there. Second place, everybody else in town that ain't in jail or sick in bed will be hangin' round there, too, to see the big pay-off of the gift money that this here old dead and gone pappy guy left to his pets. But say, listen: With any

kind of a break it's goin' to be us three and not them dumb hicks that'll have the spendin' of——"

"Not so loud, Caps—you ain't makin' a speech," counseled the ever thoughtful Solitaire. "This guy that's to bring the important money across—besides his bundle and his workin' man's make-up, what else is there about him to help me spot him?"

"What else do you need? Chances are he'll be the only guy that'll come across that bridge, goin' toward the mill, round four o'clock tomorrow. Him comin' along with his nice tidy little bundle—ain't that enough? . . . Oh, folks"—even in his half whisperings his voice sang with the gloating that was in it—"oh, folks, this is goin' to be the swellest job that ever a small mob like this one pulled off anywheres! If they're only goin' to hand out one-quarter or one-third of the give-away dough tomorrow—and, as I told you, my tip all along is that they're figurin' to divide it up into three or four payments, a week apart, takin' care of the old hands first—why, what with the regular weekly payroll added on, the gross ought to run big—big as hell! Why, it might go to seventy grand—eighty grand—ninety, even! And if they've switched the play unbeknownst and decided to bring along the whole amount that's due to these rubes all in one chunk—but say, that's expectin' too much! My cut on what we do get is goin' be enough for me.

Soft livin' from now on for all three of us—huh?"

In the darkness where they squatted they made little greedy sounds with their lips as though sucking juicy morsels. The leader was the first to swallow his imagined tidbit down.

"Well," he said, "the rest of the play is clear enough, eh? Me and Pink, here, we lam in the little car with the stuff. Somewheres down the line we ditch her in a swamp—Lord knows there's plenty of swamps between here and the coast; we can take our pick. Then, if there's no hitch, we meet you, Caps, in Charleston four or five maybe six days from now, for the big split. If we get there first we'll wait, layin' quiet at that place down by the station where——"

"Don't worry about that," cut in the scout. "I'll be waitin' there myself when you get in."

"Wouldn't it be better if you stuck round for a couple or three days anyhow?" suggested the bulky Feary, in his thick, eaten-out rumble. "You beatin' it too soon might set these here hick bulls to thinkin' somethin', and if they trailed you—well, you know there's goin' to be hell raised all over when the blow-off comes. And——"

"Not a chance," said the Kid crisply. The Kid quite often had heard that saying touching on honor among thieves, but being a thief himself he never experimented, if possible to do otherwise, with a view to testing the soundness

of the proverb. "I'm trustin' you two with the bundle for these four or five days because I got to—and that's long enough. I'm beatin' it out of here Sunday, bright and fair. I gave the foreman my notice last Monday. Tomorrow I'm through. And Sunday I blow. I'm sick of this whole country—sick of gettin' blisters on my hands hustlin' stuff in the shippin' room over at that damn cotton mill, sick of talkin' to these Johnny Raws and country Janes that don't speak my language. And I'm sick of the chow they feed you on, thinkin' it's food—corn bread and cow peas and fried fat meat and boiled rice and gummy yellow yams. I don't care if I never see no more boiled rice again as long as I live. Me, with my roll, for the Main Stem quick as ever the rattler can get me back there!"

As he waited, the three foot travelers went by Solitaire but they all came from the east, from behind him, and so he gave them no heed excepting to flatten himself the more closely into his protecting jog until they passed. Then, soon after, the wagon rattled through in the dust cloud of its own raising. Then, watching out from behind his upright, he saw a lone pedestrian coming out of the west and heading toward him. It was a man, moving along briskly. He carried something under his left arm. For a very brief space his figure was framed in the squared opening of the bridge,

with all his contours sharply marked and outlined, and then as he entered the zone of false twilight, the shape became blurry and indistinct. But, for his purposes, Solitaire had seen enough. The man approaching wore soiled overalls of blue jeans and what he carried was a smallish rounded package, enclosed in paper wrappings.

Even in the cloaking dark it was plainly to be seen that this individual experienced a profound shock when, about midway of the bridge, Solitaire, stepping out of covert, met him breast to breast. But this shock for him instantly was swallowed up in a greater one as the barrel of Solitaire's automatic buried itself for half its short length in the bibbed frontlet of his overalls, belly-high on him.

"Stand still, bo!" commanded Solitaire. "Don't you move! And don't squawk!"

The advice appeared superfluous. From fright and astonishment the man was instantly rigid. Only his midriff, obeying a perfectly natural impulse, shrank mechanically inward under the pressure of that blued-steel muzzle.

"What's in that bundle you got?" asked Solitaire, his voice laden with menace. "Talk fast—but talk low." Ordinary procedure would have been to loot the victim without questioning him, but here Solitaire must make sure. In a business so important as this there must be no mistake made. He counted on fear to bring forth the truth.

But fear, it seemed, had in this case gone further. It locked the overalled man's jaws and swelled up his tongue. Striving painfully to answer, he only stammered:

"Pp-p-p——"

He strove harder:

"P-a-a——"

"I know—payroll," supplemented Solitaire, piecing out for him. "Payroll and what else?"

The other tried again but choked on his unintelligible effort. His stutterings made no sense.

"Tell it, bo, if you're hopin' to live," prompted Solitaire. "What you got here?—what does it come to?—quick!"

"Q-q-quar—quar——"

He gagged and gurgled, the sounds fluttering in his constricted pipes. With a supreme desperation he got the final syllables out:

"——m-m-m-m-il-l-l-ion!"

"Quarter of a million! What?"

Incredulity, gloating, a feel of exultation so great he scarcely could make his brain accept what his ears had caught up out of these fractional scraps of words—the incredible admission temporarily stripped Solitaire of caution. His own voice rose:

"Quarter of a million—that what you're tryin' to say?"

Entirely speechless now, the man nodded his head as fast as he could wag it.

It was incredible and yet it was true. Not

the payroll and a third or a fourth of the bonus; but the payroll and the full sum of the bonus lumped together—a quarter of a million! Past believing and still a fact.

With his left hand Solitaire snatched the parcel out of the stiffened crook of his man's elbow. It was heavy, firm, solid, the very heft and shape of it a comfort to his clutching palm.

Solitaire, though, was no 'prentice hand to be swept off his feet by tidings of ever so great and thrillsome a joy—to break and run before the task appointed to him had been rounded out and finished. There were formalities remaining; essentials in the ritual of his craft.

He stepped back a pace, his gun playing in his grip:

"Get 'em up, buddy . . . both hands . . . get 'em up high! Now turn round slow, slow—that's it; now stand right still."

He shifted the package, gripping it close to his body by the pressure of his right arm, and with his freed hand he swiftly slapped the despoiled person, front and back, flanks and armpits and waistband. Under the thick jeans, on the right hip, he felt a heavy lump. That was what he expected to feel; a treasure-bearer naturally would go armed. He jerked down the shoulderstraps of the overalls and drew from a rear pocket of the wearer's trousers a revolver and dropped in into his own side coat pocket. He yanked the sagging over-

garment still farther down until it bunched and corrugated in folds on the other's lower legs. For added emphasis to this, his final warning, he bored his gun-snout into the man's spine.

"Stick right where you are for ten minutes, bo," he admonished. "If you move—if you squawk—if you turn your head to look round—if you make a sound—there's a pal of mine waitin' right here, handy by, to plug you good and plenty. You ain't got a Chinaman's chance. Ten minutes, remember, and then you beat it back out of here the same way you came."

He retreated swiftly, confident that no outcry of alarm would be raised behind him. His confidence was not misplaced. The robbed one, goggling, gasping—and obedient—stood exactly where he was, his hands above his head, his ankles caught in the accumulations of their blue jeans fetters, a cold sweat rising out of his hair-roots, and on his face the look of one who has had a tremendous and a stupefying surprise.

With his gun bestowed in its breast holster inside the vent of his waistcoat, Solitaire came out of the easterly mouth of the covered bridge. He did not run. A casual eye would have been caught by the sight of him running. But he walked very swiftly, like a man going upon an errand calling for haste.

Seeing him coming and seeing that he carried a round small package circular in shape with

flattened ends, like a canister, and enclosed in paper coverings well tied on, with stout cord running round and round it and criss-crossed over its top and its bottom, Feary set the car in motion. It was going ten miles an hour as Solitaire, hurrying forward, swung himself up into the seat by the driver. It was going thirty-five when it came alongside the first of several many-windowed buildings of the Tuckahominy Mills Company that stretched, in an irregular row, along a low ridge of clayey red loam where the land dropped away to the shallow ravine of the creek.

Out of the corners of their eyes as they passed, the two men in the swiftly moving car saw that in front of one of the smaller buildings —one that bore the word "Office" painted above its doors—a big touring car stood, and about it a crowd that might number hundreds, patently made up of townspeople and operatives. Some few of these persons turned their heads with a mild curiosity as they whizzed on by, but their passing at such speed made no special stir among the crowd. Even in that flash of time they both could tell that much.

Nevertheless, Feary mended their gait. Immediately they left behind the most outlying of the negro cabins on the fringes of the town, and the heavier valley loam gave place to a light white sand where their way wound in and out among the loblolly ranks of cut-over pine lands. Until now neither had said a word.

With his eyes front on the road unreeling before him and his capable hands juggling the steering rim of the careening car, Feary, out of one corner of his mouth, presently spoke:

"Got it, huh?"

"Sure," answered Solitaire, who jounced and slid on the cushions, with his body half twisted about as he watched behind them, searching for signs of any pursuit in the spindling second growth, which whirled past, life-size, then at once diminished in perspective.

"Any rough stuff?"

"Like takin' marbles from a kid. He had a gat on him, too—I got it here. The poor fish—carryin' his gat where he'd have to halfway undress himself to get it out. Scared stiff, scared dumb, too—mighty near it!"

"How much in it?"

"How would I know? All I know is I got it." Solitaire, between jolts and side slips, answered this with a seeming sharp impatience.

"What say I slow up and we give it a look?" Feary's eyes were on fire with greed. His coveting glance darted to the paper-wrapped cylinder in his companion's lap and the car buck-jumped out of the soft ruts.

Solitaire, in great apparent alarm, cried out:

"Look where you're goin'! Have you gone dippy, Pink? I don't know what we got and I ain't carin', neither—not till we're a couple hundred miles from here and hived up somewheres, safe. Think we've got the only fast

car there is in this country? Just about now them suckers have quit runnin' round in circles and are shapin' to give us the race of our lives. You drive her—and you drive her like hell!"

And Feary, seeing the force of this argument, drove her like the naughty word. In forty-five minutes the car ate up nearly thirty miles.

Now, in this respect, the trouble with Feary was his ignorance. As well as a man might who assiduously had studied local maps, he knew the route they meant to follow, its main roads and its crossroads, and its detour lines for avoiding the occasional small towns of this sparsely settled district. What he did not know was the physical configuration of the country or the natural characteristics which hereabouts marked changes in the terrain. Even at this speed at which they traveled a native-born would have been advised by certain things—by the increase of the salmon tint in the soil; by the thickening up of the underbrush, with briers and bays and gum-berry bushes; by the water maples and holly and cypress and live oaks succeeding the pine barrens; by the recurrence of puddles filled with water that was the color of freshly steeped sassafras tea; and, most significant of all, by the appearance of stringy tufts of Spanish moss dangling like gray scalplocks in the clutches of the tree limbs. But Feary's experience had taught him that the transition from a flat to a

bottom invariably was marked by a dropping-away in the earth.

So, since the road vanishing in the twist of a sharp angle just ahead of him seemed to continue straight on and on ahead upon a surface as level as the palm of your hand, he took the turn without checking speed. But the heated tires met soft gray mire and skidded, and the car spun around almost in its own length. A mud guard caught on the tip of a cypress knee so that the car reared up behind like a breachy colt.

The whirling blur passed from before Solitaire's eyes. He got on his feet, somewhat shaken but so far as he could tell not really hurt. A holly tree had broken his plunge; its prongs had scratched him, but the stiff foliage had saved his bones. He must have been flung right against the top of it. With one arm thrown up he had saved his face as he shot in among the barbed leaves and spiney twigs—he remembered doing that. Even in the shock and flurry of the smash-up he had not failed to hold fast to his burden. One set of fingers were gripped in the stout twine fastenings of it as he lifted himself up and recovered his hat from where it had fallen.

The car was alongside him. Its nose was half buried, right on the verges of the swamp; its rear wheels, though, still rested on the narrow strip of solid ground. But it would

run no more for a while; an appraising glance at it told Solitaire that. A forward fender was stripped entirely away. Through its dished-in front the radiator was slobbering steam and hot water, and the back axle was knuckled and twisted out of all proper shape where it had struck something solid and unresisting as the car came slap down after that violent back kick.

He circled behind the car. Feary lay on his face in a little pool of saffron water, his figure curiously foreshortened. One of his legs was twisted up under him in an unnatural crook and the trouser leg that covered it seemed strangely flabby. He might not be dead but he surely had a dead look about him. Certainly the leg was smashed. Probably the steering wheel had done that. Solitaire saw now that the steering wheel was bent forward on its stem as though a heavy body had been jammed with great violence against it; he had overlooked that detail in his first swift inventory of damage.

He put down the parcel, caught hold of Feary by the hollows under his arms, and without troubling to turn him over, dragged him through the soft ooze to a sizeable cypress tree fifteen feet out in the edges of the swamp and left him, still face downward, behind the tree bole. Returning to the roadway, through muck halfway up to his legs, he observed with satisfaction that the intervening trunk almost completely hid the flattened body.

This admirably suited Solitaire. If Feary was dead, he would rest there as well as anywhere. If he weren't dead or dying, but only knocked cold, it merely was a question of time —of minutes, perhaps, hours possibly—before those who must be following, found him. Anyone who came upon the crippled car hunkered down halfway on and halfway off the strip of road would search about the spot, of course. Personally, he rather preferred Feary dead to Feary living; thereby things would be simplified.

To lighten his slimed feet he cleansed them as well as he could and with his precious package bestowed under his arm stood for a moment invoicing the prospect. Taking a short cut to one side or the other was not to be thought of. Either he would bog down, perhaps to founder and be smothered, or what was almost as serious a thing, he would get lost. So he must push ahead, across the slash, traversing a built-up dirt causeway that became of semi-liquid consistency in places where the seepage had come through its saturated walls. On ahead of him, some two hundred yards, he saw open water; a flimsy looking corduroy bridge spanned a slough. At no matter what risk, he must for a while stick to the highway, such as it was.

He started on, then halted and turned back, possessed suddenly of an idea. He took his soft hat off his head and pitched it well out

into the swamp to the left of the squatting car. It sailed prettily, struck flat and floated brim down. That was good. It was more than likely the pursuers would waste time there, probing for the hat's owner and for the money. Wearing Feary's hat he went east, running hard and casting up with his feet sprays of yellow water.

As he ran, high thoughts possessed him. Thanks to chance and his late associate's recklessness he was on his own; he was playing the good old single-handed game again. Win or lose now, he would play it out so to the showdown.

And wasn't it a stake worth playing for?—a quarter of a million! There was the suggestion of an anticipatory caress in the way he hugged the small round firm burden to his breast as he splashed ahead. He had an almost overpowering desire to halt and tear away the wrappings, to open the container, to feast his eyes and favor his fingers with the sight and the touch of what was inside. He wanted to fondle it, tick it off in thousands and tens of thousands, stack it in sheaves on some handy stump. But he put the teasing thought from him. It was delectable, but also it was childish, foolish, dangerous, entirely out of the present question.

From the dizzied second when realization of the value of his prize came out of the sputterings of the man in overalls, Solitaire had designed to keep the whole lot for himself. Had

the amount been within the scope of their original calculations—running up, say, to seventy or eighty thousand dollars—he would have kept the faith, breaking bulk fairly with the confederated pair of his helpers. But this purse was too big for splitting or sub-splitting. It should be for him and him alone, a suitable reward for the larger risks he had taken and for his wit in scenting the great chance back yonder at the very beginning.

Perhaps Solitaire's reactions were unique—I don't know. Perhaps his temptation was comparable to those which come sometimes to men calling themselves honest. I am no psychologist to say which it was.

Anyhow, he had meant, from the moment of that first overpowering revelation, to trick the two accomplices for their shares—to make away with Feary, if needs be, at some favorable period of their flight, then later, when opportunity and comparative leisure served, to eliminate the Kid from consideration, either by violence or threats of violence, possibly by craft, but somehow. The Kid had been the smallest of his worries. The Kid was timorous, with the lily liver of a rabbit and the guts of a guinea pig; in this equation he represented the Least Common Divisor. Bare suggestion of a gun play would take the soul right out of him.

But now the combination of a mud slide and a cypress root had solved the more pressing part of the problem. Practically, Feary had been

disposed of by his own act, saving mess and bother. The immediate concern was for Solitaire to save, intact, himself and the swag.

On all sides the outlook was lined with difficulties; apprehension began to ride even higher than his hopes rode. By now, the whole territory behind him must be up and humming. There would be policemen, constables, sheriffs and sheriffs' deputies on the move. There would be citizens organizing in groups as volunteer vigilantes, or trailing as solitary huntsmen. If he succeeded in eluding the domestic possemen, there would be private detectives—Burns's men and Pinkertons—hurrying down from the North as fast as the railroads could fetch them. And here he was afoot, on his own slender resources, and a stranger to these parts, using an accent foreign to the customary forms of speech, a figure fit for the scrutiny of every native eye.

He had set foot upon the sagging corduroys at the passage of the slough when the hope of deliverance budded in his mind to definite form. What quickened his brain to a shaped purpose was a thing he just now heard. Ahead of him, as yet out of sight but clearly audible, something—men or cattle or possibly men on horseback—made splashing, floundering sounds in the slushy underfooting. He caught no note suggestive of tires or wagon gear jangling; but the *slog-slog* of soggy feet was plain enough, not far off, either, and drawing nearer.

In their well-devised course he and Feary

neither had met nor had overtaken any others. They had passed, at a distance, some darky cabins and that was all; the section over which they had come was one of poor lands and of few and scattered houses. But here, in this whereabouts, walled in by quagmires and by dense hedges of painted-looking greenery, he was about to encounter these oncoming travelers. The travelers, whoever they were, conceivably might not suspect him, but assuredly they would mark him for an alien. Inevitably, the townspeople, outpaced thus far but no doubt coming up hot-clip, would ask questions of all and sundry along the way, especially with the clue of the wrecked automobile to warm the chase for them.

But the pursuers would look for a man reported to be armed and presumably desperate, a man dressed after a certain fashion and answering to a given description, and, moreover, one literally quilted with stolen moneys in a vast amount. What if such a man, thus distinguished, should vanish altogether and in his stead there went forward one who was ragged and penniless and in all seeming regards a harmless wayfarer? What if this transformed loiterer very shortly, at a point somewhat distant from these present surroundings, so maneuvered as to get himself bestowed in a retreat where the searchers would seek last of all, if at all, for a driven fugitive known to be enormously in funds?

The project, whole and complete, spurred into his mind in that same flash when the sound of approaching steps came to his sharpened ears. In no time at all he was out, thigh-deep in the swamp, and had wedged himself in under the bridge logs, close against the sodden, quaky bank. A minute or two later two mounted men clattered over his head, speaking of trivial personal matters in their drawled vernacular.

A little farther along the sight of an abandoned car bedded down across their path, like a brood sow, sent them hurrying forward. So they did not see the blocky figure, unencumbered excepting by its dripping wet garments, that immediately thereafter emerged from hiding and regained the made ground and ran swiftly off, heading for the higher places lying to the east and south of the drowned lands.

With Solitaire haste was the essence of the contract he had made with himself. With as little delay as possible he counted on snugging himself in where, by his estimations, he would be safest from the chances of detection. Lying doggo in his cell in some remote and rural hoosgow he could, by means of newspapers and lock-up gossip, keep track of the vain hue and cry until it ran its abating course. Without bringing suspicion upon himself he could follow the fortunes of his late associates. He would know whether Feary lived or had died, whether

the Sweet Caps Kid had been apprehended as an accessory before the fact. If, in spite of all, they found him there, if they recognized him for the Tuckahominy hold-up, he still would have a potent weapon in reserve for his own defense. Through the bars he could traffic with them; a prisoner, he yet could bargain practically on his own terms. For he alone could lead them back to the treasure with which he had levanted. It would be his freedom against so much cold cash. Money talks and in his behalf a quarter of a million would argue with an eloquent separate tongue for every one of its quarter of a million units.

Solitaire figured on getting a matter of thirty days or so in a convenient county jail. His mistake was that he did not know the custom of the neighborhood. What he got was ninety days on a county chaingang and that's a vastly different thing.

Where the swamp petered out, first to half-flooded islands set in reedy and weedy waters, and then to solid earth, he struck across fields and woodlots. He slept, supperless, that night in a thicket. In the morning at daylight, on the edge of a patch of young sweet corn, he stripped a scarecrow's frame of a terribly faded, terribly weather-beaten coat. Under a brush-pile he hid the coat which he had worn in his rôle as an itinerant steam fitter looking for odd

jobs; that was the part he had played coming into the State. With the coat he left the two pistols—his own automatic and the overalled man's cheap gun—and all other things which by any contingency might serve to identify him in his proper person. He carried the scarecrow's bleached and ragged vestment on his arm as he went along on his way.

Luck continued to serve him. Two miles farther on he came upon a cabin, standing in a small clearing. Watching from a fence row, he saw a negro woman stretch a plow rope between the butt of a well-sweep and the trunk of a chinaberry tree and drape thereon a meager string of newly rinsed garments which she took from a tub in the dooryard. Then she balanced a heavy basket of garden truck on her head and went singing along a grass lane into the woods. He waited until he made sure that, with this negress gone, the cabin was quite empty. He took from the line a damp cotton jumper, ragged at the elbows, and from the house a pair of broken brogans and an ancient cap. On a kitchen table in the one room stood a tin plate containing pones of stale corn bread and some slivers of side meat, glazed over with cold grease. He breakfasted swiftly on these scraps. Safely back again beyond the brush fence he made more changes in his wardrobe. He now was satisfied with his appearance; it ought to deceive anybody.

He knew that not far to the east of him must

run the railroad. He came upon it, at a siding where a south-bound freight waited for a passenger train to pass. When the passenger train went by and the freight shuffled back on to the main line Solitaire went with her, curled up in a far corner of an empty box car. Fifteen miles below, the free passenger dropped off when a halt was made at a fair-sized town, a county seat by the looks of it.

An aproned individual who, by the looks of him, was a solid citizen, stood at the door of what apparently was his own retail grocery establishment at a corner on the street running parallel with the tracks. With his sockless feet dragging in the pilfered shoes that were too big for him, Solitaire limped up to this person, beginning his plea for alms in the studied whine of the professional panhandler.

The business man shook his head.

"Better get out of here while you can," he said without heat, in a soft and almost a gentle tone. "This ain't the best town in the State for tramps. And you make the second one I've seen already this mawnin'."

It was the cue Solitaire desired. He cursed the citizen vilely. He called him a certain name —a name often used in debate elsewhere but not as yet popular for common usage in the cotton belt. There it is still the primest fighting word of all the fighting words.

With a promptness of gesture which did not match in with his air of being a sober burgess

nor yet with his lazy speaking voice, the grocer flung his right hand back under his apron skirt. For Solitaire, realism was being carried too far. He had calculated, by his insolence, to bring on a wordy encounter, no more. But what sort of a country was this where side street retailers carried gats in the daytime and craved excuse to use them?

Solitaire ran, ducking low as he turned the corner. Half a block along he ran into the arms of a coatless man in a uniform cap with a large silver badge pinned to his shirt.

It seemed that in the squatty city hall the city judge sat, awaiting any possible court business. Solitaire, being arraigned, gave a name and the frightfully indignant merchant and the city marshal gave testimony.

"Hum," said His Honor. "The big cities, seems like, are tryin' to unload all their tough hoboes on us folks down here—gettin' to be worse than the boll weevil. Let's see, now—vagrancy, beggin', usin' profane and insultin' language, disaw'dly conduct—say, I reckin it's just about time some of you bums from up Nawth had a lesson."

Solitaire grinned. Calling him a bum—he who could buy and sell this dump of a city hall and its police judge five times over and still have a couple of hundred thousands left! Besides, this scheme of his was progressing so beautifully! He just had to grin. But His Honor on the bench did not see the joke.

"Think maybe it's funny, huh?" he commented acidly. "I'll learn you to laugh—three months' hard labor. Any other cases, chief? If not, court's adjourned."

Evidently justice hereabouts moved speedily. Solitaire ate his midday meal, such as it was, at a place called a county farm. Already he was encased in a shapeless two-piece rig of broad striped black and white and on his legs were noisy hobbles. Most of the convicts at the farm were "single shackled"—a ring fast on the left ankle and a long chain with a loose end which might be looped up about the waist. But for some reason or other, perhaps because he was a city product, so Solitaire subsequently decided, the blacksmith who served as deputy keeper chose to double shackle Solitaire, with a ring for either ankle, one riveted on him and the other locked on, and an eighteen-inch length of clanking iron to join them.

He stayed at the farm less than two hours. That same afternoon, with two other newly sentenced offenders, he was taken in a wagon to a camp, so called, in the lowermost edge of the county, a dismal empty place of tidal creeks and sand banks, and was entered there as a member of a road gang. Part of the time the gang repaired roads over which scarcely anyone traveled. Mostly, though, they spaded out canals and laterals for the reclaiming of some salt water meadows, digging and barrowing and stacking from sun-up until dark under the

eyes of warders who were so singularly alike that it seemed they must have come, finished and set-up, from the same mold—three lanky, sun-dried men with prominent noses and unprominent chins and languid malarial eyes, who carried sawed-off shotguns and heavy canes and seemed to dislike all things except authority and chewing tobacco.

At night Solitaire slept—if the mosquitoes, which took on at dusk when the sand flies left off, would let him sleep—as one of a double row who lay on fouled blankets upon straw, with their heads lined close up under the side walls of their canvas shelter and their feet edging an aisle down the middle; each one of them being hitched on by a link of his own private chain to a longer and heavier chain which stretched the length of the tent. He was fed on corn bread and salt pork and blackstrap molasses and a brackish fluid which passed for coffee. Six days a week, while his cumbered shank bones ached continuously to the weights upon them and the winged vermin stung him and bit him and hummed at him, and the semi-tropical sun cooked him, he shoveled stinky black mud or else fine hot white sand. Sundays were the days of rest. He spent his Sundays beneath the tent with his tether-mates, all of them bound together as though for the night watch, like so many uneasy living charms on a giant's bangle; and the guards sat under a fly and played seven-up.

Ninety days Solitaire did thus and so, and all that time the irons were never loosed off from his legs. He toiled until he was spent from heat and exhaustion and insects' poison. He got a touch of coastal fever from the uncongenial climate and was cured of it by his toil. In his filthy motley he looked rather like a gross and unwholesome worm, or rather more like the piebald larva of some vast worm, and he lived the life of a worm. In all his ninety days on the gang he saw no newspaper, nor heard one single informing word from any source whatsoever of what went on in the world beyond his resident marsh. He might as well have been dead. Often he almost wished he were dead.

It was along about the beginning of May when Solitaire first penetrated the inland swamp where Feary smashed up his car for him. It was early in July when he returned to it, walking with a peculiar spraddle-legged gait which had become his enforced habit. The swamp thatch along the marges was jungle-thick by now and the slough was shrunken up and all its surface was scummy from stagnation; instead of standing inches above water level the causeway stood a good yard above it. As soon as he was in sight of the crossing he broke into a shambling run, scuffling his feet over the earth. It would be a good long time before he accustomed himself to the

fact that he could take a long and a free step. Now, for all his haste, his stride measured just eighteen inches.

In a fierce fever of hurry he splashed down off the roadbed and, stooping, scrooged under the corduroy bridge and felt in a little recess in the spongy soil. His heart gave a big jump in him when the pushing fingers met a solid cylindrical object. Through his captivity he had been tormented by profound misgivings touching on this hiding place for his treasure. He had thoughts of the possibility of a freshet swelling the slough and washing the bank away, or a hog rooting the cache out; of the chance that repairing the bridge, say, some human visitor had happened upon it. But here it was, identically where he had left it and surely all whole and tight. The wrappings about it were molded and stained but still quite intact.

He could not wait another minute. This was the moment he had been picturing since the end of spring. He must have a look at what was inside—must tally it, bill by bill, and count it in multiples and check and re-check the noble total of it. Squeezing the package in both affectionate hands, he scrambled out from under the logs and on a dry place behind a clump of young water maples he squatted down, got a cheap new knife out of his pocket and cut the mildewed strings. The paper, glued by the dampness to what it enclosed, stuck tightly. He set the thing on end, ripped

away a segment of the adhering cover from the top and seeing then that the container was of tin, sealed and soldered fast, with a grunt of eagerness he drove the knife-blade down through the thin metal and wrenched sideways to make the cut larger. He bent the edges of the opening down and in.

A smear of bright red instantly appeared upon the hand that gripped the can to hold it upright. He must have gashed himself—no, he hadn't either. The sticky red stuff wasn't blood; it hadn't come from him. It had come from the triangular rip in the tin top. More of it was coming, oozing out under jostling and pressure and bringing with it an oily, pungent, familiar smell.

He stood up, turning the can downward and away from him, and with a small bubbling sound a slender stream of the thick red liquid spurted forth, coating his hands and splattering his legs and his old shoes, and making a little red pool at his feet. It continued to run out until he knew the receptacle must be about empty. To make sure, he shook it and the answer from within was a very faint splash and gurgle.

He felt empty, too. There was an all-gone sensation at the pit of his stomach as though he had eaten no breakfast that morning, as though his disappointment had translated itself into a hunger pang.

Immediately, though, he pulled himself

together, readjusting. Solitaire had a certain rough and primitive philosophy in him. Those have to be philosophers of a sort who live by the chancy trade he followed.

"Hell of a country!" he said aloud. "I'll say it's a hell of a country where even a rube goin' home to paint up his hen-house or his back stoop or somethin' has to pack a gat on his flank."

He shook his head in puzzlement. It was as if this shook a new thought loose in his mind. Addressing himself, he spoke on:

"But say, look here now, that guy told me, well as he could for stutterin', that it was the big money he was carryin'. Yes, didn't I ast him twice't to make sure, and didn't he try to say 'Yes' plain as a guy could that was past talkin'? That guy was too skeered to try to lie to me. What the . . . "

With a dripping red finger he shucked away the torn paper altogether and, turning the can over, found pasted on the under side of it a printed label.

"So that's the answer to the little riddle," he said, almost casually. "Well, damn a stutterin' guy anyways!"

He tossed the smeary thing from him and shambled briskly away. He stopped once to stoop down and rub the scars on his sore ankles, then went on without a backward glance.

The can rested on a tussock of rank swamp

grass, its branded side looking up to the hot sun so that the lettering on the label stood out in clear relief.

It read as follows:

VARNOIL
READY MIXED PAINT COMPANY
ST. LOUIS, MO., U. S. A.
ONE QUART OF VERMILION

CHAPTER V

OTHERWISE SWEET WILLIAM

BEFORE continuing his remarks the speaker looked about him to make sure the rest of the group suitably were impressed. They were, and he did:

"Yas, suzz, tha's the way it is wid me. W'en I starts gittin' bad I gits so bad my muscles all bind on me an' I has crampin' pains frum haid to foot. Tha's only jest the beginnin'. W'en I gits mad clear th'ough, it's time to remove the wimmin an' chillen to a place of safety an' hustle the weaklin's, the cripples an' the sickly ones to the cyclome cellar. 'Count of that, is w'y they calls me Wild Bill, the Human Harry-cane.

"I reckin it muster been travelin' wid the circus, playin' alto cornet in the Genuwine Zulu Band, w'ich has made me so rough that-a-way. Circusses ain't no place fur people wid weak hearts. Prob'ly"—his eye swept the ring of properly awed faces that encircled him—

"prob'ly they ain't none of you niggers present w'ich could last one season out wid a circus; but me, I stayed on goin' on nine yeahs. An' went stronger all the while!

"Tek that time in Springfield, Ohio, w'en the bigges' elephint, name of Emily, went rampagious by reason of somebody havin' give her a bottle of pepper-sauce an' her thinkin' 'twuz red pop till too late fur her to change her mind 'bout drinkin' it. A elephint 'bout the size of a steam calliope that's burnin' up insides of her wid some new kind of a hell-fire w'ich water won' squench is a powerful onhealthy pusson to prank wid, I'll tell the waitin' world!

"Well, fust they gits the menagerie top cleared out an' 'en they reclaims the w'ite man that'd give her the stuff out frum under the sea-lionses' tank; w'ich they called him a practical joker in the paper next mawnin' but he suttinly wuzn't very practical lookin' w'en they wuz totin' him off to the city horspital wid one laig kind of flappin', an' him talkin' delirious. An' 'en they gits Emily chained up an' roped down an' the chief bull-man he starts in ca'mmin' her down wid a pitchfork.

"Me, I didn't know nuthin' 'bout it, bein' downtown whilst 'twas goin' on; but w'en I gits back to the lot an' starts in th'ough the markee, one of the razor-backs he sez to me, he sez:

"'Hole on, black boy, they's a crazy elephint in that there tent!'

"An' I sez to him:

"'Saginaw,' I sez, 'it don't mek no diff'unce to me ef this yere tent is upholstered in elephints; yere's where I'm headed an' yere's where I'm goin'!'

"Excusin' of the head bull-man I wuz the onliest one w'ich went near Emily the rest of the ev'nin'. An' ef you don't believe me, all you got do is jest write to my ole boss, Mist' Peter J. Power*ses*, Esquire, Owner, keer of Winter Quarter*ses*, Waterloo, Ioway, an' he'll tell you percisely the same w'ich I jest is been.

"An' 'en, tek the time yere last fall w'en I wuz stoppin' off down yonder in Texas an' the Ku Klux*ses* started projectin' 'round. They taken an' whupped two uppidy cullid boys, an' they toted one w'ite man off to the outskirts an' fixed him up fur the Indian summer in some tar an' some feathers an' w'en he come crawlin' back to town next mawnin' he looked like a frizzly chicken caught out in a high wind. Yas, suzz, that w'ite man wuz ever'thing a hen is, 'ceptin' he couldn't lay aigs an' didn't feel much lak cacklin'. They tells me he wuz the bigges' part of two weeks sheddin'.

"So folkes in gin'ral and 'specially cullid folkses begins lookin' wall-eyed ever' time anybody speaks of them ole Ku Klux*ses*. But me, I ain't payin' 'em no mind. An' so one day a man come up to me an' he sez to me, he sez:

"'Look yere, nigger, ain't you actin' purty brash 'round this town fur a visitin' nigger? Next thing you knows, the Entertainment Committee goin' be waitin' on you!'

"I jest looks him in the eye an' I sez to him:

"'Is this a warnin'?'

"'Tek it or leave it be,' he sez; 'but they tells me pickin' plumages off frum betwixt yore shoulder blades ain't no easy job.'

"'Lis'sen yere,' I sez, 'mebbe you kin run some of these yere skeery domestic niggers out of the state by a passel of w'ite men ridin' 'round dressed up in baid-sheets. Let one of them git a notice frum the Ku Klux*ses*,' I sez, 'an' prob'ly he'd *finish* readin' it on the train. But ez fur me,' I sez, 'I ain't felt no call to be lookin' up time-tables yit. W'en I gits good an' ready to go,' I sez, 'I'll go, an' not one lonely lil' minute befo'. Ontil 'en,' I sez, 'I 'spects to stay right where I doggone is!'

"Tha's whut I sez to him. An' whut's the upshot? Them Ku Klux*ses* done they cluckin' elsewheres an' not nary once't did they come pesterin' 'round me. They jes' let Barbee go on 'bout his business. I reckin they must 'a' heared that people w'ich comes after me lookin' fur trouble gin'rally goes away lookin' fur a doctor. Tha's me, men, right down to the groun'. Treat me right an' I'm mild ez spoon-vittles. But start somethin' wid me—tha's

all, jest start somethin'—an' whut you starts the *pallbearerses* finish."

Having made an end of his oration, the advertiser moved majestically off up Yazoo Street, a splendid figure in splendid raiment, followed by respectful and more or less admiring glances from his late audience. Whatever his private motive might have been in extolling his valor—whether he wanted to impress such local notables as Red Hoss Shackleford and Aesop Loving and Logan Dismukes and Amasi Steger, or whether it was that he just loved the sound of his own voice uplifted in self-worshiping—there was no doubt of the results in the minds of the hearers. They had harkened without interrupting, and they believed without question. For all remaining there knew the truth about this departing personage and might testify to it. They knew him for one of those rarest of created beings—a boaster who lived up, spirit and deed, to the text of his boasting. Twice already, since his recent advent, had he proved it. He had proved it on the stricken body of Smooth Crumbaugh and he had proved it in the instance of Abraham Begat Isaac Hopper.

If one wished to be technical about it, or fussy, it wasn't precisely an advent. More exactly was it in the nature of a triumphant re-entry. This fascinating and traveled bravo had been born and partly brought up in these same parts which his presence now adorned.

Ten years before he had stolen away with a street carnival, an inconspicuous stripling then, and of the color of scorched molasses, giving no discernible signs of ultimate genius or future distinction. After these years he had returned in the full possession of his greatness —a gifted musician, a graceful and sinewy athlete, a conversationalist of rare powers whose favorite topic was himself, a master at retort and repartee, a metropolitan and a man of the world—yes, and, as speedily developed, a man of his word. Almost, in his absence, he had been forgotten; the truant had become a faint, chrome-shaded memory vaguely to be recalled—if recalled at all—in connection with dazzling teeth and nimble feet and an adolescent aptitude for playing on a mouth organ. These things served to fix no identities in a town abounding in brown-skinned youths who could dance and syncopate. But it did not require of him many days or indeed many hours after his arrival back to re-impress himself upon the residents of north Yazoo Street and Smoketown and Plunkett's Hill.

For this swift enlargement of his repute there were reasons and good reasons. To begin with, he was the dashing dark conquistador whose sketchy portrait has just been painted, in part, with the help of his own quoted language. In the second place, he was such a finished musician as the Afro-American populace of his home town never in all their

lives had known. Thirdly, his wardrobe caught and held the eye. Fourthly, he wore for a handle on his name the title of Professor.

Now, music—either the love for it or the power to produce it—is supposed popularly to exert a gentling influence upon the human individual who cultivates this one of the muses; is even held to have charms to soothe the savage breast and bend a knotted oak. (See Bartlett's "Familiar Quotations," page 294, for fuller particulars.) It still is an issue in dispute whether dogs do or do not like music—their behavior when hearing it leaves one in doubt—but zoölogists agree that as regards the beasts of the field and even of the wild, the softening and restraining effects are undeniable. So, by rights of naturalistic laws, the returned one, being an accomplished instrumentalist and a composer in his own rights, should have been of gentle mold; there again he upset the averages. Here was a braggart who by his acts justified all his bragging, here a sweet minstrel, a wandering troubadour who, when crossed or irritated, swung a devastating fist. Hence, and properly hence, Wild Bill, the Human Hurricane.

As, on this day, he swaggered off through Yazoo Street with his fawn-colored derby cocked far to one side, those left behind stared at him in his retreat and for a space were mute, dominated still by the spell of his personality. It was Aesop Loving who broke the little

silence. Himself, Aesop was given to stylish adornment of the person.

"Suttinly talk biggetty, don't he?" he murmured.

"Suttinly do," agreed Amasi Steger. "An' likewise act biggetty. An' *is* biggetty, ef it comes down to that."

"Also is," Logan Dismukes added with unqualified sincerity. "Shorely is jest whut you jest sez, Amasi."

"Still, I've tuck notice 'at the bigger they is, the harder they falls," said Aesop. An undercurrent of jealousy, one might even say of malice, coursed beneath his words. Softly he began chanting the refrain of a song written long before by a local bard in commemoration of the crime, trial and hanging of that famous malefactor, Devil George Winston. It ran like this:

Well, fly high, ole buzzard, you bound
to light some day!

"Better tek keer 'at w'en he lights 'tain't on top of you," said Red Hoss Shackleford. "My memory ain't so pore but I still kin remember whut happen' to Smooth Crumbaugh th'other night. Talk 'bout lightnin' strikin'—*um-m-ph huh!*"

At this the hush redescended again upon all there. The reminiscence was fresh in their minds; it would stay fresh through the long years to come. Mentally each recreated the setting and the scene: the interior of the

Bleeding Heart short-order and soft drink emporium at night-time of the second day following Professor Barbee's arrival; Tump Glass, of the night shift, serving him and those he had invited to join him, in a light snack of cold barbecued shoat; the host in the generous act of paying the total charge from a fat roll of bills; and at that precise moment the timed and dramatic entry of Smooth Crumbaugh, swaying under the influences of synthetic gin and therefore doubly dangerous. As he came through the door his bloodshot eye had fallen upon the currency in the stranger's hand; the very sight of it seemed to inflame the desperado. It was the first meeting between these two. Neither, it would appear, previously had heard of the other. Smooth had been absent; the Professor had been busy at the congenial task of recommending his own qualities.

There was a feel of impending tragedy in the air as Smooth Crumbaugh, lurching slightly, advanced toward the new arrival. The others present shrank aside. They had just been hearing the Professor telling all about himself. But they knew about Smooth Crumbaugh. As the old saying had it, the farther you went up his street the tougher they got, and Smooth lived in the last house.

He laid a huge black paw upon the faultless lapel of the Professor's pin-striped coat, and his opening speech pounded forth from him in a menacing thunder:

"Look yere, slim nigger, how come you got all 'at money fur to spend an' ain't been spendin' none of it on me?"

Instead of answering, the other almost gently put a counter question of his own; the subtle irony of it was over Smooth Crumbaugh's bullet head.

"Who is you, ef at all, may I ast?"

"You better ast!" Smooth's fingers closed on the garment and he jerked its wearer roughly. "You better ast! I is the offerci'l bully of this yere town. An' w'en a strange nigger blow in yere wid cash he gin'elly pays his life insho'ence by givin' me the mos' part of it——"

Parlor magicians have proved that the hand may be quicker than the eye. So swiftly did the Professor's right hand clump into a fist and so swiftly did the fist travel to its mark, that the spectators sensed rather than saw its upward swing. But there was no doubt about where it struck; they heard it land and, astounded, marked its effect.

Say two minutes later, the dethroned Smooth Crumbaugh came to. On account of his jaw he spoke in what might properly be called broken English; even his words, somehow, seemed swollen and stiff and sore. From the floor where he lay the smitten one put the query almost humbly:

"Mister, who is you, anyways?"

Professor Barbee paused from blowing on a

skinned knuckle. One jaunty elbow was resting on the lunch counter. He was not exalted, not noticeably ruffled. He was poised calmness itself.

"Me?" he said; "now you asts me who *I* is? Well, I'm goin' tell you. I is the pusson you thought you wuz w'en you come in yere."

No one who was eyewitness to this thing—and Aesop Loving had been numbered among those who did witness it—would forget it, however long he might live. Nor would Aesop cease to have vivid recollection of an occurrence of two weeks later down at the foot of Franklin Street, for likewise he had been present when this subsequent thing happened. To the envious Aesop, now trailing in second place as sartorial runner-up, it seemed the fates were decreeing that always he must be on hand when this usurping upstart scored his most brilliant triumphs.

Swift's Floating Palace had arrived to pay its annual visit. The show boat was nosed in at the bank just above the upper wharf boat; the customary band concert preceding the evening performance was going on; and the sloping gravel wharf was speckled with clumps of listeners. Other auditors were massed on the shovel-blade deck of the upper wharf boat. Mainly they were colored. The lower floor of the aquatic theater might or might not be filled with white patrons that night, but the proprietor knew, as his professional

glance swept the shore, that the gallery would hold a capacity audience. He was sorry his theater wasn't all gallery; he always was sorry when he reached this town, with its forty per cent of black population.

On this evening the dashing Barbee was squiring an acknowledged Yazoo Street belle, one Melissa Grider. He was, as usual, a mold of fashion; she preened her smartest feathers. She was his chosen companion now; later, when the curtain went up, she would be his guest aloft up there in what some white folks calls Peanut Heaven. They stood together on the wharf boat. In the manner of one who knows the amusement world by heart he was directing the attention of his flattered lady to certain technical faults on the part of the show boat's band leader in the directing of the march measure then being rendered—or is rended the word?—these musical terms so often are confusing to a layman.

At this moment an unseemly interruption befell. A roustabout had stolen away from his duties on the Chattanooga packet to enjoy the concert and he heavily trod on the tender toes of a resident who, as would appear, was touchy in other places as well. Hard words between the two ensued; then hard blows, then a clinching. The intertwined adversaries swirled into Melissa, almost jostling her from her feet. Instantly her escort was in action. With a dazzling dexterity he seized the struggling pair by

their respective collar-napes and jerked them widely apart. The roustabout was sent spinning away in this direction; the other man spun away in that. Excepting that he struck something solid, it is probable that the latter might have spun clean off the unrailed guards of the wharf boat into deep Tennessee River water.

What stopped him was a family group composed of Aunt Diana Hopper and her progeny, or, rather, a member of that group. Aunt Diana was deeply devout; she named all her children right out of the Good Book. The human teetotum grazed her ample skirts, barely missed her daughter, Revelations Hopper, whizzed between the twins, Tekel and Upharsin, and banged squarely into her son, whose chief claim to distinction, other than having been christened after words traced out by his mother's finger in Matthew, first chapter and second verse, was that at the age of twelve he weighed 140 pounds, although of no more than the average height.

The chunky prodigy was perched on the gunwales of the wharf boat, facing outward, when a swiftly moving body struck him from behind and sent him, for all his firm bulk, straight overboard. Upon striking the water he did two things, practically simultaneously:

He went *glug* and he went down.

Terrific clamor arose, but the agonized shriek of Aunt Diana led all the rest.

If it was a white man who expertly pronged

the grapple end of a boat hook into the collar of the victim as he arose to the surface, it was Professor Barbee who directed the supplemental rescue work. It was Barbee who made everybody stand back and give the gurgling boy air; Barbee who suggested up-ending him so that the water he had swallowed might, by gravity, be induced to flow out again; and Barbee, and none other, who added a final noble touch to the picture by handing the frantic mother a ten-dollar bill as balm for her feelings and as payment for damage to her son's wardrobe. In fact, the Professor took the center of the stage from him who by rights should have been the real hero, just as at a funeral your polished undertaker sometimes steals the limelight away from the remains. There was sympathy for young Abraham Begat Isaac Hopper; but there were cheers for Wild Bill, the efficient Human Hurricane.

Nevertheless, and notwithstanding that his thoughts had been directed back to these historic events, Aesop Loving now renewed his crooning of the line which carried in it a warning and a prophecy concerning the buzzard that flies too high. With a reedy note of disfavor in his tones he was repeating the pregnant refrain long after the form of Wild Bill had been lost from view in the distance. As Aesop figured it, nature and luck had done entirely too much in their joint endowment of this individual. All right for him to be a pugi-

listic marvel, all right perhaps that, temperamentally, he should be the pet of fortune. But to make a walking fashion plate of him was carrying prodigality just a plentiful little bit too far. Aesop's one grain of comfort lay in recalling the proverb about pride going before a fall.

Still, as time went by, it must be confessed that the gods of humility deigned not to set snares or pitfalls for the Professor's unstrayed and unstumbling feet. By day and by night he kept right on gaining in popular favor so that his civic fame became many cubits high. In society he was an enormous success; artistically, he had no rival worthy of the name. Being abundantly supplied with funds, he felt no call to follow after any of those devices which spoil most of the waking hours of workaday folks, and thus had fuller opportunity for the exercise of his social talents. With him it more was a labor of love than of necessity when he formed the largest colored orchestra this end of the State had ever known, with himself—naturally—as its leader. He was more than its leader; he was a dictator, if ever there has been one.

It was felt, though, that he reached the ultimate pinnacles of popularity and prominence when he set in motion his plan for organizing and equipping the Plunkett's Hill All-Colored Volunteer Fire Fighters' Brigade. A holocaust gave him the cue for this forward step. One

windy night in the late fall, fire originated in a cowshed on Emery Lane, upon the far slope of the gentle eminence known as Plunkett's Hill, and well beyond the corporate limits. With all promptitude the paid department answered the call. But from Central Station to the alarmed neighborhood was a distance of fully two miles; from Station No. 2 the way was even longer. Moreover, the run must be made in part through muddy by-streets where the heavy hose carts had slow going; and finally, to top the chapter of disaster, the water-mains ended at the municipal boundary. Before the fire had burned itself out for lack of more material to feed upon, the Colored Fraternity Temple, a frame structure two stories in height, had gone up in flame, with almost the spontaneous alacrity of a celluloid comb, and a long stretch of those narrow, two-room wooden dwellings known South as "gun barrels" had been swept to their spindly brick foundations. The main reason why all the sufferers were colored was because no white families whatsoever lived in the burnt district or, indeed, anywhere within the devastated and distracted suburb.

Fairly before the ashes were cold, Professor Barbee had his inspiration. But he bided his time, holding the idea in reserve until the suitable moment for presenting it had arrived. With his other favors he had a sense of psychology. He struck, so to speak, while the iron

was hot, at a mass meeting which had been called by and for members of the race to take steps for succoring the chief losers by the fire. In another part of town on the same evening, white residents were acting in the same worthy cause.

Two of the colored pastors, the one colored lawyer practicing at the local bar, and both of the colored physicians, as representatives of the higher professions, had been heard. On behalf of the capitalistic classes, the colored undertaker and Green Wilgus, the leading master barber, also had spoken when Professor Barbee, rising from where he sat in the body of the house, obtained recognition and advanced to the platform and took the floor.

A ripple of surprise ran through the assemblage. It was observed now that his trousers were tucked into rubber boots and that he wore a long raincoat buttoned up to his throat; yet the night was not a rainy one, either, and the hall well heated. Likewise, as though to enhance public curiosity, he bore in the crook of his left elbow a mysterious queer-shaped object encased in paper.

But when he began to speak, speculations regarding these curious accessories immediately were lost in admiration for his flow of language and in interest for the topic with which he dealt. His powers of eloquence never had been shown to better advantage than now. It was, as he said at the outset, all very well to raise

money for temporarily housing and feeding those made homeless. (Applause.) But his thoughts went further even than this laudable end. Let the people cure, in so far as was possible, the present ills resulting from the late confergation—his use of this word creating a distinct sensation—but let also his hearers look to steps which in future would lessen the possibilities of another such destructive visitation. (Great applause.) He continued:

"In briefly, this yere is now the notion w'ich I has worked out in my own haid: We will start up a all-cullid voluntarily fire departmint fur the special purtecktion of the chief cullid locality, w'ich, ez you all full well knows, it's Plunkett's Hill. We will have our own ingine house out there, wid our own ingine an' our own hook-an'-ladder wagginses an' so fo'th, kep' on the insides of it. We will have our own reg'lation uniforms same ez I has seen 'em in Nawthern parts of the country endurin' of my travels to an' fro, w'ich them uniforms'll be made to awder, fur the members thereof. (Distinct stir of approval.) An' so, my friends, w'en yereafter the summonses rings out on the midnight air, 'stid of us runnin' 'round waitin' fur the w'ite firemen to git there, an' in the meantime all our prop'ty mebbe mos' lakly bein' consumed to the ground by the devourin' elemint, our own cullid fire-fightin' fools will hustle into they uniforms, bring fo'th our own cullid ingines an' all, an' prob'ly git 'at fire all

squenched out an' damped down befo' them w'ite firemen is more'n ha'f way to the spot. They will be a chief, w'ich he will tote a brass trumpet fur to yell his awders th'ough it, an' they'll be sev'l deputy chiefs.

"Nur is that all. We fu'thermo' must have, by all means, a ladies' oxiliary society to purvide comfort an' hot cawfee in cold weather fur our gallant men-folkses. Fur, ez all wise men knows, you kinnot do nothin' right in this world widout the helpin' aid of the sweet an' lovin' hands of the fair ladies of the land. (Cheers and handclaps and Aunt Diana Hopper crying out: 'Heah 'im, Lawd!' as though in church.) Also an' mo'over besides, we will have fur the mo' elderly men a exempt firemen's association w'ich I finds they also is quite common in the Nawth where I is been. . . ."

Voice from the floor, speaking eagerly:

"Whut-all these yere exemptious firemen got to do, Br'er Barbee?"

If the query for the moment daunted him, the Professor gave no sign of it; possibly he did bat his eyes once or twice. Sparring for time, he addressed the direction from which the interruption had come:

"I don' know ez I precisely ketched the question. Will the gen'elman w'ich perpound' it kindly rise in his place an' state her once't ag'in fur my understandin'?"

Uncle Gid Fowler, the veteran janitor of the Planters' National Bank, got upon his feet.

"Ez one of de older men w'ich you mentions, I wants to know dis—whut is de duty of these yere exemptious ones?"

"Oh! Tha's it, is it? You desires to know whut the exempt fireman do? Well, suh, I'm very glad 'at question wuz put by you—very glad indeed. The exempt firemen—they"—he might have been hesitating for the value of the dramatic effect. But it was only a very brief pause, for this was a ready thinker—"they natchelly goes to all the exempt fires. They ain't no tellin' w'en a exempt fire'll break out." He hurried forward to forestall any more of these technical riddles. "An' in between times they gives counsel an' advices to the younger men. An' they also wears a uniform: (More applause, led by Uncle Gid Fowler.) Speakin' of uniforms, Mist' Cheerman, I desires to speak on slightly fu'ther. Figgerin' 'at this yere notion of mine would meet wid yore ondivided favor yere tonight, I taken it 'pun myse'f to awder a reg'lation voluntarily fireman's uniform frum a large Nawthern establishment, w'ich I has patronized 'em frequent in the past. I done this privately an' unbeknownst to all. I sent the awder in by the telegraph company, payin' all the expenses out of my own pocket, an' only yistiddy evenin' the uniform arrive', safe an' sound—*an' yere it is fur you all to see!*"

With one swift motion he rent from the bulky parcel, which all this while he had been nursing in his left arm, its paper covering and clapped

it upon his head; with another fast play of arms and shoulders he divested himself of his shrouding raincoat and stood revealed, an eye-filling, soul-lifting, magnetic figure in a shiny metal helmet with the word "Chief" in gold letters across its frontlet, in a flannel shirt with a double row of big buttons down its breast, in a wide black belt with a broad bright buckle of brass to latch it, in glistening rubber boots. Now, the shirt, moreover, was in color a brilliant crimson; and the contrasting buttons were of lustrous pearl and in the gaslight shot forth iridescent gleams. And the helmet made headgear fit for a king.

As one, the entire assembly rose to its feet, cheering. Professor Barbee knew his people, there's no denying that. Charity is sweet and altogether admirable, but charity, however much to be commended and practiced, is, after all, rarely picturesque or spectacular. Almost the original object of the gathering was forgotten in the flare of enthusiasm which swept Colored Odd Fellows' Hall in the wake of the favorite citizen's master stroke. The prospect of playing a godlike rôle as a saver of life and property from the clutch of greedy mounting flames; the possibility of being a subchief—there was no doubt regarding the identity of the chief; practically he'd already elected himself, and the selection, by acclamation as it were, had been ratified; the hope of owning one of those red shirts and one of those tower-

ing helmets; the hope of being an exempter or a lady oxiliary—in nearly every bosom there, splendid ambition had, in that electric quarter-hour, been aroused.

Before the mass meeting adjourned, committees in ways and means and on plan and scope had been named. It seems almost needless to add that upon both committees the honored name of Barbee appeared and that he was the unanimous choice of his fellow members for the chairmanship of the more important one of the two.

Promptly then did he proceed to justify his election to the post of executive responsibility. His example stirred the efficient; it stimulated the laggards. Why, the man spawned thoughts as the roe-shad spawns the roe—not singly but in clumps. For the debit page of the ledger it might have been entered up that authority and power had the deference of the multitude enhanced, if such a thing be possible, his air of arrogance. With conscious self-sufficiency he ran over the top and spilled down the sides. But has not the same thing been true of Napoleon and Hugo and Cromwell and many another superior leader of causes?

It took a Napoleon to shape the common enthusiasm into a definite channel; this genius did it. Talking about the Plunkett Hill's Volunteer All-Colored Fire Fighters' Brigade was one thing; having visions of it as an accomplished reality was part of that thing; but pro-

viding the financial framework for it was another. To the Professor the credit must in justice go for the notion of the great home-talent benefit entertainment—a notion which caught the popular fancy as a flame catches tow. Here was the plan:

There would be given a grand benefit performance where every worthy local amateur might have full chance to shine; a dance afterwards on the cleared stage; refreshments for all at a price, these last to be provided by the Ladies' Oxiliary—and the entire proceeds, less bare expenses, to be devoted to leasing suitable quarters for the Brigade and equipping it with the necessary apparatus. No part of the fund would be needed for the purchase of uniforms. Dozens of prospective fire-fighting gallants already had sent in their personal measurements, accompanied by cash remittances, and thus early various white residents had been startled by the sight, on Sunday afternoons in the colored quarters, of dark pedestrians who wore heavy metal helmets and brass-mounted belts and the reddest of red shirts adorned frontwise with the pearliest of all possible buttons. Some of these apparitions jauntily carried pickaxes, also privately purchased against the day of action; it was a sort of dress rehearsal, satisfying to the principals and giving added vivacity to the weekly promenade.

Such pleasant preludes were as so much free advertising for the approaching benefit; not

that it needed the advance publicity. The date drawing nearer, the affair grew in scope of its own momentum. Three weeks before its natal night it became apparent that Colored Odd Fellows' Hall could never hold the audience; the main committee met and, in one splendid sweeping gesture, leased the Franklin Street Opera House. Professor Barbee put through this ambitious deal. Only a man of parts could have crowded into his days the duties which he assumed. He drafted the program, he selected the cast for the playlet which would precede the olio of single appearances, he drilled the cast in their lines—which he had written—and he taught them their stage business. He passed supreme and final judgment upon this detail and that; and finally he found time to compose, especially for the occasion, what he spoke of as a characteristic and descriptive overture march. But none save the members of his orchestra—and they all pledged to secrecy—was permitted to have knowledge of the nature of this offering. They practiced it behind locked doors; to friends they hinted at novelties in theme and treatment which would make the grand opening number the outstanding feature, really, of the whole eventful evening.

Nearly all the white folks ate cold suppers or warmed-over ones on the big night; else they cooked their own suppers. Long before dusk the customary goddesses and chieftainesses of

the kitchens of the Quality had vanished out of back gates and through alley passages.

Was it a big night? Was it the biggest of all conceivable nights? The *ayes* have it, unanimously. The doors of the Franklin Street Opera House opened at seven forty-five. The audience began assembling shortly after half-past six, drawn thither by a delicious fever of restlessness. It was fine to see the multitude assembling, finer still to be seen there in one's most gallus and most gala raiment. For once, at least, the colored population would not be cribbed off in the uppermost balcony which ordinarily was reached by a side way and, even had there been no greater lure, surely this alone were worth coming early and beforehand for. The side door was closed now. All might march in by the wide front entrances; any, having the price, might appear for this night in dress circle or parquet or stage box. And did! It subtly marked the change in the ordinary regulations governing the theater that by eight o'clock every chair on the sloped main floor was occupied; but the top gallery was as empty as an empty grave. For who would deign to sit in his old place aloft when now he might reveal himself downstairs?

At the front of the house no white functionary showed himself. Green Wilgus sold tickets through the box office window; Amasi Steger, in his red shirt and his glazed belt, took them up at the doors. The ushers were recruited

from this year's graduating class of Magnolia Colored High School; back of the scenes the stage hands were members of what might be called the younger Colored Owl Lunchwagon set —dashing blades of the night life group, young men-about-town, taking on this job for the novelty of it and the joy of having an anonymous part in the benefit.

There was visible but one white face, which was a very broad face belonging to Officer Brack Mount of the city constabulary. By police ordinance a representative of the uniformed force must be present at any public performance in any public place of entertainment; Brack Mount, who measured forty-nine inches around the chest and was as strong as Bashan's prize bull of Holy Writ, had drawn the detail. He inclined his mighty bulk against the rear wall, his hands in his pockets, his slouch hat on the back of his head, while a dark tidal wave burst through the pent sluiceway of the door jambs and, spreading then, went flooding and cascading down the slant of the floor to inundate each inch of seating space.

There might be a milling to and fro and a heartening excitement at the front of the house, and there was. There might be a delectable anticipatory flutter behind the lowered curtains where performers in make-up got in everybody's way and stumbled over the stage properties and got up again and were altogether happy; where, also, the two leading ladies—there were

two of them—stood quite apparently at ease and in seeming amity, swapping compliments upon the effectiveness of each other's costumes. If the straw-toned Ophelia Stubblefield had the advantage in complexion over her sister actress —the latter's prevalent tint being a clear colorado maduro—it was not to be denied that there was something compelling about Melissa Grider. There certainly was something. Beyond question she did fill out those cerise fleshings of hers.

Racketing confusion might prevail out there; secret gnawing jealousies might here be masked. But in the mien and manner of Professor Wild Bill Barbee when, promptly at eight ten, he entered the orchestra pit, coming through the trap from beneath the stage, there was no suggestion of a febrile pulse, no sign of nervousness. He came, as befitting a captain, at the head of his special command, the Barbee Orchestra. He was exactly and sharply on time as announced on the printed program—not one half-second ahead of it, nor one quarter-second late, but precisely on the clock's tick. He bore himself as should one bear himself who has been the guiding spirit in a large undertaking now substantially accomplished and who is a champion unchallenged in any department of his various supremacies.

Responding to a clamorous welcome, he took his bow, first alone, then beckoned his squad forward to take another bow with him. The

lesser men seated themselves, adjusting their music racks, fingering their various instruments. He stood erect and for a dramatic half-minute he looked into the mounting faces which beamed upon him, row on row, diminishing away in the distance to dots, and he saw more fine ivory than the average elephant hunter finds in a good season in Equatorial Africa. He saw something else most warming to the heart of an *artiste*—admiration, appreciation, all the sweet essences that are distilled from popular idolatry; all those rich proteids and filling butter fats of the milk of human adulation. He almost could feel himself taking on flesh; they almost could see him taking it on.

"*Ting!*"

He rapped with his little black baton upon the rail in front of him, threw his head back and stiffened into a wide-aimed posture, and, on the signal, the salutary strains of his original composition, which was to keynote the evening's entertainment, fell upon all those attentive ears.

It introduced itself quietly, the special overture. There was, at starting, a soft slithering of bows on the strings of violins and a harmonious sound which, were it a visible thing, might have been described as shimmery. Into this there crosscut an interruption of trills and chirps. It was the trap-drummer, executing upon a small warbling device the sounds which in all orchestras whatsoever are regarded

as correctly imitative of the notes of any or all of our native songbirds. Quickly, then, the tempo changed; loud interpolations succeeded, these also the doings, mainly, of the busy trap-drummer. As a sharp high shrill passage occurred, with the piccolo strains predominating, the drummer clanged a gong sharply three times; then, after a little pause, three times more. A moment later he was clattering two cocoanut shells against the rim of his snare drum; next he was uttering siren notes on a short reed instrument shaped rather in the form of a sweet potato; next sliding many dried peas back and forth in a swiftly manipulated tin cannister; next was dropping all else and catching up cymbal and bass drum stick to add brazen clamor and dull rumbling roar to the ensemble as his fellows suddenly soared out of their shivery and quivery comminglings into a blaring, smashing, crashing discord purposely and melodically contrived.

To those who played and to him who swayed above their bent forms directing them, the intent and the picture of all this was clear enough. To them it was typical and topical, appropriate and highly illustrative. Expressed in terms of music, it was a chapter from the life of a volunteer fire fighter: First, the ethereal evening filling the happy community with its peace and quietude; the glimmer of the moonlight upon the stilled bosom of the old bayou,

the serenade of that winged minstrel of the Southern night, the mocking bird; then, suddenly, the alarm bell ringing out upon the silent air—the engine house doors banging open—the harness dropping in place upon the backs of the prancing fire horses—the reverberating thunder of their shod and eager hooves when they surged out and across the sidewalk—the bleating whistled warning from the throat of the engine's steam escape pipe as the panting red monster sped toward the endangered spot—the hiss of the water hurtling through the hose, spraying out and forth in a solid column, leaping up from the aimed tip of the nozzle like a silver scimitar to slash its way into the bright heart of the devouring flames—the tinkle of window glass breaking in the terrific heat—the downward sweep and deafening smash of tumbling walls—the distress, the fright, the running to and fro; and then, for a climax and a culmination to this phase of the composition, the outcry of the frenzied populace. The concluding measure would deal interpretably with the rescue of the imperiled ones, with the extinguishment of the flames, with the triumphant return of the brave fire laddies to their station; then, once more, the moonlight, the calm of night, and for finale, the farewell sleepy note of the mocking bird repeated thrice and slowly, plaintively, dying away into sweet nothingness.

Creators often are like that—often are

prone to assume that their symbolism will be as clear to those before whom it is expressed as it is clear to the mind of its originators. Certainly Professor Wild Bill Barbee was like that. So, too, were the members of his orchestra; their leader's confidence had been to them an example and a patterned model.

So now, midway of their rendition of this, his masterpiece, and immediately succeeding the production by them of the crescendo effect of falling masonry, they paused. It was the cue for him to inject the most graphic touch of all the designed realism. He swung about, facing the sea of faces that rose before him and beyond him, and he stretched his jaws to full gape and at the top of his voice delivered himself of three words, to-wit, as follows:

"Fire!"

"*Fire!!*"

"FIRE!!!"

The third word, though, the one here spelled out in capitals in an effort to express the intensity with which the Professor voiced it, was never finished. Really, he got only about this much of it out:

"FI——!!!"

His mouth, open to its widest diameter, froze in a round congealed orifice of stupefaction, and the last two letters froze with it.

One instant he had been blaring his outcry into the sea of faces aforesaid. In the next, stunned and confounded, he stared at a tossing

ocean of backs—backs of heads, backs of necks, backs of convulsive, weaving, kicking legs, backs of backs and of yet more backs.

Who, fitly and amply, can describe a panic in a crowded hall—the stark, primitive emotions of the huddled pack, the trampling underfoot of the weaker ones, the screams, the rending of garments, the mad strugglings, the shucking-off of the flimsy fabric of a vaunted civilization and the instantaneous reversion to elementals and to the caveman's cardinal instinct for self-preservation? Who, I ask you, properly can describe that? I know I can't. I shan't try.

For my part I shall be content with trying to tell, not how one panic rose and spread, but how this one was checked.

Until now, the narrative has had a single central figure. From now on, for a briefened space, it must have a second. The main rôle herewith transfers temporarily to Officer Brack Mount, he who was fashioned on the lines of the Scriptural bullock. He made a competent successor. Why he, the sole Caucasian present, should more clearly have translated the imagery of the Barbeeian overture than any other there is one of the mysteries, for he ordinarily was rather a plodding thinker and musically was by no means so apt to catch shading and cloaked rhythmic meanings as some of his Afric neighbors should have been. But about his behavior when the first dazed quick scram-

bling among the seats had merged into the rush for the outdoors, there was nothing enigmatic. Anybody with half an eye could have told exactly what intent was in this large white man's mind.

To its last frenzied unit that audience, in a solid groundswell, rolled toward the one remembered exit. It sought for safety and would find disaster. The jamming in the aisles might yield only minor casualties, but once let the fugitives begin blindly stumbling down the stairs which led to the street a long flight below, once let them start tripping over one another on the steps, piling and writhing and crushing together in a suffocating mass, and there would be a vastly different tale to tell.

Right in the face of the foremost of the fleeing crowd the broad double doors were slammed to, and against these doors, with his back to them, Brack Mount interposed a mountain of brawn. His fist flailed against the chin of the first onrushing figure to come in arm's reach of him. It fell to the lot of Logan Dismukes to be vicarious sacrifice for his fellow man. I'll say he fell.

Logan formed the bottommost layer of a structure magically reared. Brack Mount struck again and found a second mark in Babe Givens, and the said Babe, who was long and limber, folded up like a carpenter's rule and lay down to peaceful dreams on top of Logan Dismukes. Brack struck again, again,

once, twice, thrice, again, and the ring of stunned forms on the floor at his feet was growing. He couldn't miss. He didn't. Regardless of age, sex or size the big white man caught them, right swing or left hook, as they flew into range, and added them to his collection. It was rough surgery but he had a most desperate case on his hands.

Before the menace of the towering, pitiless figure that blocked the way, the front wave of the flight wavered, then gave back slightly, blocking the retreat of the press behind; and in that blessed second of grace the voice of Brack Mount came out of his commodious chest in a roar that dominated the mounting babel of screams and cries and groans as a fog whistle cuts through the mewings of the sea gulls when a storm is on:

"Hold on, you fools, there ain't any fire! There ain't any danger!"

Somehow his sincerity held all of them, or nearly all, as his fistwork already had detained the makings of a dozen. Somehow, even in that unreasoning time, they knew him for a savior and not an enemy blocking the lone path of escape. That is to say, most did. Some few didn't. Logan Dismukes didn't, for one. For ever so long after he revived he just couldn't be convinced that any white man who had his best interests at heart would have hit him that hard.

Brack Mount was prompt to reinforce his

argument, the crowd swinging and bulging in irresolution:

"Course there ain't any fire! Don't you-all get the idea?—that crazy nigger down yonder —that one that runs your string band for you —he only just yelled 'Fire!' to make his music sound more natural. Why, don't you get it yet?—he was imitatin' a fire department with his fiddles and whistles and things. Just makin' believe, that's all—the derned idiot!"

His words made converts manifold. Scores, stalled in their tracks, stared at him over the intervening heads, still no more than half convinced. Others who believed thoroughly, twisted about in the press of bodies that confined them and looked toward the orchestra pit. And what they saw there was proof confirmatory. A hum of anger like the humming of hornets—with some shaky bursts of laughter in it—began to override the abating chorus of fright.

Sist' Callie Meriwether, who was ready any time to meet her weight in wildcats—prime selected No. 1 red winter wildcats, at that—broke free of the jam.

"So tha's de way 'tis, is it?" she shrieked. "Skeerin' de giblets out of me fur nuthin' an' gittin' my bes' clothes all tore off me. Lemme at 'im—tha's all—lemme at 'im!"

As passionately she headed back down the center aisle, Sister Meriwether took a deep breath and amplified her threat:

"Lemme git my two hands on 'im once't—I aims to turn 'im ever' way they is but loose!"

She charged, and she charged not alone. She but voiced the sentiments and the intent of nine hundred others, more or less. She but led the hunt. They followed fast. Their hats were smashed, their holiday gear was damaged, their dignity had been beleaguered and upset. Their evening had been spoiled, their toes most cruelly had been trodden on, their jostled bodies were bruised and sore. It looked as though Officer Mount might have to take on another life-saving job—an individual job, this time—whereas heretofore tonight he'd been strictly a wholesaler.

A brave man may fear no single enemy, but who is there among us that can withstand the spontaneous and whole-hearted hostility of a race? The Professor saw the tempery Aunt Callie coming. He saw Uncle Juny Tallers coming—old Juny, the blue-gummed man, whose bite was sure death—and old Juny's lips were skinned back in a snarl of rage and the blue gums showed. He saw a great host coming down upon him and he heard what they promised him. He had not got back yet his powers of coherent speech which, as previously stated, quit him halfway through that fatal ill-advised third word, but the prospect of immediate destruction by mob violence restored bodily activity to his palsied person. Before him, just between the paralyzed legs

of two of his associates, yawned the opening of the passageway leading from the orchestra pit under the stage and on out through the stage door. He went in it like a flying squirrel in a knot hole.

Some two weeks later a white gentleman was asking Aesop Loving what had become of that tall dark brown fellow named Barbee. The white gentleman said he hadn't seen him lately about town and he had been wondering.

"Ain't nobody seen him lately, suh," said Aesop, smiling happily, "an' the reason they ain't is 'cause he's went frum 'mongst us. Seems lak he must 'a' got tired of flinchin' ever' time anybody yelled out 'Fire!' behind his back on the street, w'ich wuz toler'ble frequent. He suttinly wuz right tamed down an' pitiful lookin' to'des the last. I reckin' also mebbe he got tired of hearin' the new name w'ich they'd taken to callin' 'im by. He may a' been Wild Bill w'en he hit this town but he wuz Sweet William w'en he went away."

CHAPTER VI

HIS MOTHER'S APRON STRINGS

OUR circuit judge of those other days, the Honorable William Pitman Priest, was never the one to boast much. Usually his acts spoke for themselves. It was a rare thing when he felt called upon to speak for them. But times change, and the fashions of men change with them. The last time I went back home for a visit I found him transformed into a proud and a vainglorious old person. The way he went around town bragging certainly was a caution. Practically you might be a stranger to him; that made no difference. On the slightest provocation, or on no provocation at all, he would haul a photograph from his pocket and show it to you and start right in to tell you the tale that went with it.

He would fetch it out and hand it over with an air which as good as said that in permitting you to take it in your hand he was conferring upon you a considerable honor. It was smeary on the face from much handling, and the cor-

ners of it were chafed limp and frayed where he had carried it in his pocket, but the judge seemed to set great store by it.

Then he would go ahead and tell you the story, rambling away from, and back again to the subject, as was his way, and speaking with the studied disregard for the rules of grammar which also he favored. He did not have to tell me all of it, though. Some parts of it, I, as one of the native-born, already knew. For me he merely pieced out the gaps.

It becomes necessary to go, as briefly as may be, all the way back to prime causes. It would appear that the original mistake in the case of N. B. Forrest Cress II was that he had to be born a boy. Had he been born a girl, everything would have turned out all right probably. He—or, I should say, she—doubtless would have grown up into a biddable and dutiful and satisfactory daughter. It was ordained, though, that he should come forth into the world a male, which was a ramping error on the part of predestination, to begin with.

Almost immediately, then, the perverse stars of his nativity conspired together to produce added complications on top of this first one. Already, in advance of the event, they had provided, as a mother to him, one of the most loving and at the same time one of the most stubborn of created women. Now, furthermore, they decreed that he should be an only child and that his father should die before the

son was out of the cradle. Just one thing was needed to make a complete and utter hash of the little chap's prospects. The governing fates attended, competently and thoroughly, to that detail. The young widow was wealthy. Her wealth, measured by the simple standards of our town, was very great—and under the terms of her husband's will she was the sole guardian of the infant heir.

She had wanted him to be a girl; with all her heart she had wanted it. Since that desire had been denied her, she set about to shape the character of her offspring according to certain obstinate notions of her own. She would rear him up to be gentle, to be mannerly, to be soft-voiced and obedient and dainty. She actually craved that her son should have daintiness to go with those other desirable traits! All through the time of his growing-up she would dedicate herself to the task of saving him from roughening contacts, from associations calculated to coarsen his nature and defile his manners. To herself she spoke of them as associations and contacts; what she really meant to keep him away from was boys—noisy, quarrelsome, belligerent little ruffians, with dirty hands and barbarous appetites and unbelievably mischievous impulses. What young Mrs. Cress did not understand she distrusted, and other people's boys were creatures which she never had been able to understand. Well, her boy would be different. Well, her boy was.

Having pledged herself to the job of her private devising, she went manfully at it. With her, determination was so strong a virtue it became almost a vice. The worst thing you can do with a virtue is to carry it to excess. Before Forry had reached the age when he began to have doubts touching on the authenticity of Santa Claus, his mother's apron strings had been plaited into shackles for his hands and his feet and his mind. What chance, then, did the poor kid have for a proper boyhood and, after that, a rational youth? Any normal-minded parent of either sex, but preferably one of my own, will tell you he didn't have a chance in the world. It sounds cruel to say it, seeing that this was a good woman and a devoted mother, but it would perhaps have been better for her child had he been fully orphaned instead of only half.

It was inevitable that the early history of Master Cress should be a succession of mistakes. The mistakes were another's, but he was the helpless victim. A fond, misguided maternal influence, which was all the more misguided for being so fond, guided his footsteps by day and by night. He was kept in baby clothes, with a nurse to tend him, until the thing became a civic scandal. His mother, it would seem, figured that with white lace caps and white piqué coatlets and white leather bootees she somehow could fend off the evil hour when the child must enter upon the

dreaded estate of being a boy. But time took a wicked advantage of her; it kept right on passing until she could no longer disregard what the calendar and the increasing length of her son's legs told her.

She wept on the terrible day when for him skirts went out and kilts came in. She wept again when breeches succeeded kilts. True, these breeches were of black velvet, and came well up under their wearer's armpits, and hitched on, by means of some large, sea-pearl buttons, to a deep-collared blouse of cream-colored silk; and with them the small unfortunate was doomed to wear short socks and shiny, patent-leather slippers. Nevertheless, and notwithstanding, they marked a woeful transition in his juvenile development. For herself, though, she softened the blow as much as possible by refusing even then to permit the barber to bob off Forry's hair. As may be recalled, Samson suffered grievously through being close-clipped, whereas, on the other hand, Little Lord Fauntleroy derived an almost miraculous charm from going unshorn of his locks. Probably Mrs. Cress did not think of Samson in this connection, but assuredly she thought of Little Lord Fauntleroy; his winsome story naturally would have for her a greater appeal than that of the Biblical character.

On to a considerably later period Forry had his hair long. Mrs. Cress, ordering by mail from a fashionable Eastern bazaar, topped off

his head of somewhat stringy brown curls with one of those black tam-o'shanters such as were worn only by youngsters too cowed or too little to resist, and by musical comedy heroes answering, usually in a tenor voice, to the name of Armand. She took some small measure of comfort from the combination of his hand-made ringlets with the art-student's brimless cap. If memory serves me aright, her boy was the first of his generation, in our town, to go thus clad—not the last nor the only one, since other mothers for a while followed after the example set by her. The really pitiable part of it was that at the age of nine the hapless one still went forth on high days and holidays in these garments of her choosing and still with his curls down to his shoulders—a lonely, shy, grotesque, and feminized little wretch. He was saved, though, from the ridicule which would have been his had impious boys of his own age got a fair chance at him, for at nine he never was allowed to venture abroad unless accompanied by his mother or his governess or by both.

He had his nurse until he was past seven. He had the governess until he was past ten. After her he had a resident tutor, a pale, nervous young man who loved books and was afraid of caterpillars and life generally. At twelve he was taking piano lessons from Miss Martha Gifford, our leading authority on music. He took his lessons four afternoons a week, in-

cluding Saturdays. So, on Saturday afternoons, when our other twelve-year-old youngsters were "goin' in swimmin'" off the sawlogs below Langstock's mill or learning to start a fire without matches at the new Boy Scouts' camp out on Grasty's Hill, Master Cress, with his leather music-roll in his hand, would be walking sedately to Miss Martha Gifford's on Franklin Street. Personally, I have always contended —and still do—that such a spectacle as this is as distressful as any our modern civilization presents.

Of public schools or of private schools, either, he knew only from chance hearsay. Of what sportive pursuits his contemporaries followed, he knew only so much as might be seen by one who looked on with wistful eyes from a distance. He had a great, shady front yard to play in, provided he played quietly, and ample mechanical devices for playing, but generally there was nobody for him to play with. Such children of the neighborhood as passed his mother's censorship mainly did not seem to desire her son's company. In vacation time Mrs. Cress took him away with her to summer hotels, where he ate improper foods and wore starchy, white middy suits which soiled easily—and that fretted his mother. On Sundays he wore gloves also, and carried a cane. The little gentleman had never played baseball —an incredible statement, but a true one; he had never gone barefoot except when he un-

dressed for bedtime; he never had been in a sail-boat or a row-boat, for these, being dangerous, were to be shunned. He had never won a fist fight, although he had lost a few. He could perform indifferently well on the piano, and he knew how to enter and leave a drawing-room, and he had ridden a pony until his mother read in a paper about a man in Topeka, Kansas, being dragged to death by a runaway horse, and sold the pony. Such, up to the time when his voice began to change and the first scant smudge of down to appear on his upper lip, was, substantially, N. B. Forrest Cress, II, a living monument to that molding zeal and that constant watchfulness which had brought him to the edge of his adolescence without suffering him ever to get an honest taste of the glorious tipple that boyhood is.

I am not exaggerating; the likeness is drawn from the living model. Here was a representative of the best and the worst that apron-stringdom can do for a male child born with the natural impulses of his kind. But I must say for him that his company manners were flawless. It was, in effect, what his mother said often, with a bottomless depth of adoration in her eyes as she looked upon the handiwork she herself had wrought. She had indulged him and pampered him where, for his own good, he should have been denied. She had thwarted him in his normal exuberances and inclinations, damming up the outlets of those animal spirits

which belonged to him as a part of his just inheritances, and she had encouraged in him artificialities and appetites which for one of his years were both damaging and dangerous. Yet the poor woman, gazing upon him, and in her blindness seeing none of these things, called him perfection and preciousness.

Now, by all the rules of the game, this precious and finished product of a misapplied devotion should have stayed finished; should have remained steadfastly what his mother had designed he should be. You know the saying—just as the twig is bent, the tree's inclined. But it sometimes happens that in the sapling stage crafty Nature takes her inning and unkinks the curves that the artificer has twisted in this or that tender sproutlet.

And it was in this sapling stage, when he was getting to be all arms and legs, that the Cress boy developed tendencies of independence and began to tug at the leash. The spirit of revolt, it would seem, quickened without prior warning. It was as though today suddenly he found his silky tethers chafed him and irked him and hampered him, and as though tomorrow he had burst them, becoming outright and downright a rebel against constituted authority. From being the best boy in town—that is to say, the best by common maternal consent—he had turned, overnight as it were, into something considerably removed from a pattern and a model.

The port and manner of his misbehavings made him almost a sinister figure. There was a certain strange slyness about him, a certain covering-up of his mutineerings in the snobbish garments of his culture. A boy who transgresses against the code which has been built up for his restraint may be excused—and frequently is—if he sins openly and boldly and crudely and in the company of his fellows. But a boy whose voice is soft and low, a boy whose hair always is brushed and whose wardrobe always is in order, a boy who goes by roundabout and solitary ways to achieve his forbidden ends—that boy is a study for psychologists and a standing puzzle to other boys and other boys' parents. One week this particular boy was a sensation in town; another week and he still was a sensation, but likewise a mystery. That same brief passage of time marked a tremendous change also for his mother. She passed, in a heart-breaking swirl of shock and disillusionment and apprehension, from a state of contentment to a state of panic. The young prince had fled the kingdom, and the queen-regent didn't know what to do about it. She spent the next year or so in not knowing what to do about it.

This brings us to the point of Judge Priest's intervention. He sat, one warm day of late spring, in his chamber back of the circuit court room at the old court-house; this was two years before he declined renomination on the

Democratic ticket for another term, and retired from the bench. I wish I could draw for you an accurate picture of him as he sat there —his mussed, but clean, white linen shirt, with its broad plaits and its big, flat, gold studs; his black string tie, threatening now, as it always did, to come undone any minute; his little, white paint-brush of a chin beard, his corncob pipe, his broad-toed shoes; the United Confederate Veterans' button in the lapel of his loose, black alpaca coat, and so on and so forth. But since I cannot competently do that, I must ask you just to take him for granted, round belly and short legs and pink, wrinkled face and the rest. Into his presence there entered Commonwealth's Attorney Jerome Flourney, with a wrinkle of perplexity between his eyes.

"Judge," said the young official prosecutor, "I've got a doggoned bothersome thing on my hands, and I'd like to have your views on it before I do anything about it."

"Jerome, my son," answered the Judge in his high, gentle whine, "without he can't help himself, this here is too fine a mornin' fur a man to be havin' bothers or views, either. I don't know when I've enjoyed a walk across town more'n I did the one I took a while ago, gittin' over here from my house."

For the Judge it had indeed been a pleasant journey and one replete with interest. As he moved ponderously down Clay Street he had observed with approval progress on the new

Girls' High School; at least a part of the money provided by the recent bond issue for municipal improvements was, to his way of thinking, being spent sanely.

Crossing Franklin Street, he had taken note of a general stir betokening that live spirit which should characterize a city ambitious to get out of the twenty-thousand population class into the thirty-thousand class. Why, Judge Priest could remember when Tilghman Boulevard was a swamp road and you could shoot gray squirrels where the nine-story Hotel Moderne stood. And now, as the Boosters' Club urged you to do, Just See Her Grow! The Judge had halted to see her do so. And she did!

Laborers were breaking ground at Franklin and Locust for another service station, which would make two service stations for that corner alone and three for the block; and upstairs over Vogel's harness shop, on City Hall Square, a naval recruiting station had been opened. On the sidewalk at the foot of the stairs one of the young fellows on duty—a mighty smart, mannerly young fellow, too—was posted, and Judge Priest halted to pass the time of day with him, and ask him how the United States navy appeared to be coming along these days, and whether he'd had any luck yet at picking up likely youngsters in this town, and also—if the young fellow didn't mind telling him—how he managed to keep those blue pants of his up

without the use of a pair of galluses or a girth strap? They had quite a pleasant little confab together before Judge Priest waddled on; the younger man with enthusiasm described the advantages and privileges of a naval career for patriotic males of a suitable age, and the older one spoke of the excitement occasioned at the time in the Southern ranks by news of the battle between the *Merrimac* and the *Monitor*.

Sitting at his desk and looking back on the adventures of his walk, the Judge endorsed the entire prospect of life as it had presented itself to him this day—the earth spaded up for more foundations, the campaign of the government to enlist young Americans from the interior states for honorable service to their country along her coasts and on the high seas, the bustle of traffic in the business district, and all. And now here was Jerome Flournoy breaking in on his peaceful content to intimate that there might actually be something out of kilter in this most perfect of created worlds. With a little, puffed-out sigh of resignation he reared himself back in his chair to give heed and—if required—counsel.

"Well, Jerome," he said, "whut mainly seems to be weighin' heavy on your mind at the present time?"

"It's that unlicked cub of a Forrest Cress raising particular Cain again," said Mr. Flournoy. "And this time it looks as if there might

be real trouble ahead, not only for him, but for that poor, distracted mother of his."

"I thought that enterprisin' young person had done been sent off to boardin' academy or college or somethin' somewheres," said Judge Priest.

"He's back—back for the third time since last fall, if my memory serves me rightly," said Mr. Flournoy. "From what my own kids tell me, I gather that he's been through three preparatory schools in the last six or seven months—a short trip and a merry one in each instance. One of them his mother didn't like, and one of them he didn't like, and the third one, it seems, didn't like him and shipped him home again here some three or four weeks ago. It likewise seems that immediately after he got home he bull-dozed his mother into buying him a high-powered runabout. It was well named, too, that runabout. Because he certainly has been running about in it—smashing speed laws and endangering other people's lives by his recklessness, and going wild generally. I understand Mrs. Cress has already paid one fine for him down at City Court for fast driving. Probably if City Judge Brooks had known the kid didn't have a license—I don't understand why that point wasn't brought out—the fine would have been heavier than it was. And now the little idiot's gone and got himself into the makings of a really serious scrape."

"I wouldn't be too hard in my judgments on

him offhand," said Judge Priest mildly. "Remember, Jerome, the pore little feller never had any proper advantages, growin' up."

"Never had any advantages?" echoed Mr. Flournoy blankly. "A rich mother spoiling him to death, and you say that? I confess I don't see——"

"Never mind that detail now," said Judge Priest. "Let's git along to the latest facts in the case. Whut devilment has he been up to that's come to your attention lately?"

"Well, it develops that yesterday evening he tried to drive along Buckner Avenue where those St. Louis contractors are resurfacing the old roadway. There was a *Detour* sign up, and the new stretch was partly fenced off—which, it strikes me, should have been warning enough for anybody. But on top of that, the sub-boss in charge of the job, a man named Finkel, saw him fixing to bulge right on through notwithstanding, and ran out and hailed him and told him the concrete was soft and even showed him the best route for getting around past the blocked-off stretch. But the trouble with that kid is that he's been used too long to having his own sweet way regardless of the ordinary rights of ordinary people.

"He backed up as though he were fixing to turn around and then, suddenly, he gave her the gas and went bulging right through the obstruction, splattering green concrete every which way. That wasn't the worst of it,

either. One of the workmen couldn't get out of his path in time, and the car hit him, and he's down at Bray Memorial Hospital with a cracked bone in his leg. Young Cress didn't even slow up to see what damage he'd done. He just tore on out of the improved section at the other end, scattering obstacles as he went.

"Somehow or other the thing didn't get into the morning paper, and so the first I knew of it was a little while ago when this man, Finkel, came into my office, bringing a whole raft of his laborers along with him for witnesses, and swearing that he'll insist on going before the Grand Jury next Monday and having the boy indicted for malicious assault on the man that's in the hospital, and for malicious damage to property, and for everything else, nearly, on the calendar. He's pretty well worked up, and I don't much blame him, either, especially as the injured party is his own nephew and a decent, hard-working chap, so Finkel says, with a big family over in St. Louis to support. And Finkel has made a demand on me to take official action, and I don't see how I can get out of doing it. Of course, if Mrs. Cress comes across with a chunk of money, I suppose the affair can be squared. Finkel and his outfit aren't so vindictive but what, probably, they'd be willing to listen to the persuasive rustle of greenbacks. In fact, I sort of figure that's at the back of his mind and his nephew's mind,

too. So, if the thing turns one way I'll practically be lending myself to a kind of legal blackmail, and if it goes the other way I'll be put in the position of having to prosecute that boy, with all the notoriety that a trial means and all the stigma that'll follow him if he's convicted. And either way, his mother is bound to be the chief victim. She's the one I'm thinking of, not of him. He's got a lot of overdue punishment coming to him, but she's just a poor, witless, bewildered, unhappy woman and a widow besides. Why does there always have to be an innocent sufferer whenever justice is being done!

"Well, be that as it may, I've held Finkel off for a few hours by promising him that all his rights would be conserved, and I've telephoned up to Mrs. Cress's house asking her to come right on down here for a talk with me, and she's probably on her way down now. But before she gets here I thought I'd like to ask you for any suggestions you might care to make, you having known this boy's father before him and his grandfather, too, and the family having been neighbors of yours for so long, and all that."

"Ah, hah, I see," said Judge Priest. He pursed up his mouth until his tuft of wispy chin-whisker bristled out in front of him. "Tell me, son, does Mrs. Cress know yet just whut the nature is of this here newest mess her son has got himself into?"

"No, I judge not," said Mr. Flournoy. "I didn't want to frighten her over the telephone by going into his escapade."

"All right. Ef you want me to do so—and I kind of figger that's whut you're hintin' at—I'll undertake to tell her the news and discuss ways and means with her—ef she'll listen. It's almost time she wuz listenin' to somebody, I'd say. I'm sorry fur her, of course—who wouldn't be?—but to tell you the truth, Jerome, I'm purty toler'ble sorry fur that boy of hers, too.

"I seem to astonish you when I say that, don't I? And you likewise acted kind of startled, a minute or two ago, when I said he'd never had the proper advantages—didn't you? Well, son, I meant just whut I said—ever' word of it. Ef he'd been born pore, or in the average circumstances, with a woman of average intelligence, say, fur a mammy to him, he'd a' had his chance, ez a little shaver, fur life, liberty, and the pursuit of a reasonable amount of devilmint. But, I'm tellin' you, Jerome Flournoy, he wuz cheated out of his birthright, that boy wuz. Frum the first hour after they unwropped him frum the swaddlin' clothes he wuz grievously cheated. He never got a fair show. He ain't hardly gittin' a fair show even now, accordin' to my way of lookin' at it. F'rinstance, take you?"

"Me?" said Mr. Flournoy, "Where do I come into it?"

"Givin' all your sympathy to that mother of his; you oughter be visitin' a little of it on the child—leastways that's how I look at it. About the best that could a' been hoped fur him, considerin' ever'thing, wuz that he'd grow up into a sissified little snob, or else that he'd turn into one of these secret scalawags, doin' his meanness on the sly, and in between times lookin' like a sugar-tit wouldn't melt in his mouth. In fact, it did look like, here a year or so back, that he wuz headed to be a first-class sneak. I count it in his favor that he should jest bust loose, like a prisoner frum a cage, and go cavortin' 'round same ez a young colt in a green pasture. It's a sign there's some good, healthy stuff in him. Well, there oughter be; he's got the right kind of blood in him and he wuz named right, to start with. It ain't too late to break him in yit—ef only a way to do the thing could be found out. Make him bridlewise, and you're liable to have a young thoroughbred that'll be a credit to his name and his town."

"You appear to have been studying the case rather closely, Judge," said Mr. Flournoy.

"Me? Why, son, that there identical little hellion has been one of my pet private charities, ez you might say, ever since he quit the nursery. There ain't been a minute, scarcely, all these years, that I ain't been sorry fur him. The Cress place bein' jest over on the next street frum me, purty near back to back with my

place, I've had abundant opportunities to study him and his mammy, too.

"I remember one time, when he wuz about eleven years old or maybe twelve, I taken it on myself to put in a word fur him where I hoped it might do some good. I met her on the street one evenin', and I said to her I'd took notice how he seemed kind of lonesome and shy and peaked, and how maybe it might not be such a bad thing fur him ef she wuz to let him mix in with this here Boy Scouts' outfit that the young rector who'd been brought on frum the North by the Episcopalians wuz organizin'; and then I was goin' on to say to her that while parental discipline, when rightly used, wuz a mighty fine thing fur any boy, still there wuz another kind of discipline, jest ez beneficial as the other, that he got frum bein' throwed with other boys and put on his own merits—a kind of discipline that'd be a big help to him in his future life. But I didn't git very fur along them lines—no sirree!"

The old judge's eyes twinkled reminiscently. "That lady jest bristled out her feathers at me like a hen with a lone chick when a tom-cat comes prowlin' in the chicken yard. She said she didn't propose to have her Forry minglin' with all sorts of boys on terms of social equality. She said if the Reverend Mr. Carteret had only restricted his troop to the sons of our leadin' families, she might 'a' listened to the suggestion of lettin' Forry go

with 'em some pleasant day, providin' his tutor went along, too, to see that he wuzn't permitted to git overheated or run into any danger or eat somethin' that wuzn't good fur him. But no, she said, Mr. Carteret had been so ill-advised as to take in a lot of common boys, and that natchelly let her out. She said she wuz mighty well satisfied with the way her boy was bein' trained up.

"She said a lot more things, but the plain meanin' of all she said wuz that she wouldn't thank me nor anybody else fur pokin' a nose into her business. So I changed the subject to the state of the weather—which, ez I recall, wuz onusual fur the time of year—that appeared to be about the only subject, anyhow, where her and me had anything in common—and then purty soon I said probably I'd better be gittin' along towards home to see ef supper wuzn't about ready. But all the way up the street, Jerome, I wuz remarkin' to myself how my old commander, the late lamented General Nathan Bedford Forrest, must be turnin' over and over in his grave to think that a boy named fur him wuz bein' called 'Forry' fur short, and wuz bein' brung up to believe he wuz too good to associate with the run of other people's boys, and wuz bein' taught that even ef another boy picked on him he mustn't defend himself and wuz bein' discouraged frum whoopin' and yellin' and cavortin' 'round when the spirit moved him. Yes, sir, Jerome, I

could almost see old man Bedford spendin' many a restless hour in the cemetery.

"That's several years back, now, and I ain't felt called upon to mention her son to her ag'in, and I wuzn't aimin' to do so, neither. I kin take a hint, 'specially ef somebody lams me acrost the head with it. But my bein' silent all this time ain't hindered me frum continuin' to take a kind of a long-distance interest in the affair. There jest natchelly couldn't be but one of two ways out of it. Either he'd stay docile and licked through all his life, which would be the everlastin' ruination of him, or else he'd rise up some day and lick her—defy her and outmaster her and smash up the despotism she'd been buildin' all these years out of her affection fur him, and start in to tyrannize her instid of lettin' her go on tyrannizin' him by love and lack of common sense. And frum all we kin gather, it's the second one of them pitiful contingencies that's come to pass. And here she is, skeered and bewildered and conquered, and there he is, runnin' over her rough-shod at home and makin' a common nuisance of himself out in the community. It may not seem like such a turrible thing to you and me, but I'm tellin' you it's a tragedy so fur ez them two air concerned.

"And now, all of a sudden here today, it seems like the issue's been forced up to me ag'in and I've got to talk to her once more. Well, there's one difference, anyhow—this

time she'll have to listen, won't she? Ef only I rightly knew whut to say, whut to suggest. Ef only——"

He broke off the sentence. Sitting there he could look out through an open east window across the ragged lawn of the court-house yard and down along the sunny vista of Washington Street to where, two blocks away, it widened into the square facing our city hall. While he spoke, his eye had been resting absently on the distant view, with the milling of foot traffic diminished in perspective to a confusion of crawling insects, and one bright spot showing, where a flag dangled on a pole that was poked out laterally from a window above Vogel's harness-shop. Now, quickly, his eye winked and twinkled, and his voice rose to the uplift of a sudden thought.

"Jerome?" he said, almost shrilly, "Jerome, by gum, I've got an idea! It's wuth tryin' and I'm goin' to try it. You jump out and see ef she's got here yit, and ef she ain't, you be waitin' fur her, and you steer her right on in here to me and leave us alone together fur a spell. Don't be startled ef the sounds of my voice, ez though raised in anger, should seep out to you through the closed door. I propose to give a mighty spirited imitation of the stern Roman judge, with a few teches of the relentless Spartan father, and maybe just a faint suggestion of a Dutch uncle throwed in fur good measure. My language may sound

rough, but don't take that ez an excuse fur bustin' in to save a pore, browbeaten widder-woman frum my fury. Jest let us be, son, jest let us be. Anyhow, there'll be somethin' else fur you to do.

"You send somebody out—one of the deputies frum the sheriff's office will do—with orders to find young Cress, wherever he is, and you have him fetched back here, and you take him into your private office, and you set him down, and then you proceed to throw the fear of the Lord and the law into his young soul. Talk to him ez he's never been talked to before. Make him hear the rattle of handcuffs in his ears; make him see the doors of the penitentiary yawnin' to receive him. Pile the agony on good and thick, Jerome—and then, after you've got him skeered within an inch of his life, you be ready to bring him on in here to me, soon ez I open that door yonder and give you the word.

"Jerome, my son, that there idea of mine looks better to me every second that passes!"

Merely because an animate object looks slow is no reason to assume it necessarily is slow, once it gets into action. There's the elephant. And there was Judge Priest.

For one of his age and his burden of flesh and his deliberate mode of speech—that is to say, his ordinarily deliberate mode of speech—it might safely be said of this old gentleman

that he covered ground that day. There was a hapless and flustered and apprehensive woman to be argued with, coerced, bullied, made submissive. There was a paper in the nature of a legal document to be drawn and signed. There was an interview to follow with a badly frightened youth just past his eighteenth birthday. There were negotiations to be carried on and formalities to be effected in yet another quarter. Finally, there was an important telephone conversation; this last came late in the afternoon.

The Judge from his chamber called up the widow at her home. He used to confess later, when describing what had occurred, that he did not dare tell her face to face quite all of what there was to be told. As it was, the venerable coward evaded making the principal disclosure, thrusting the weight of that task upon a more youthful pair of shoulders. Subsequently and frequently, he confessed that his burden of responsibility for that day already was sufficiently heavy. The end might justify the means; to his way of thinking, it amply justified them. Still, his courage would carry him just so far and no farther.

"Well, ma'am," he said, when her voice over the wire had answered him, "well, ma'am, it's all settled."

"All settled? So soon? You mean those men agreed to accept cash damages and withdraw their complaint?"

"Well, not altogether, ma'am. That detail has practically been closed up, I believe—I put it in the hands of Commonwealth's Attorney Flournoy to attend to. Whut I mean is that my part is settled up—about my arrangin' fur your son's education, et cetery."

"Why, Judge, I don't understand. I thought from what you said this morning that it might take days to close up matters."

"Well, ma'am, things moved along mighty smooth when they got started. I found it wuz possible to transact practically the entire business right here in our own city. Your son, ma'am, has already been entered fur the full term in an institution where, I have every reason to believe, the best that is in him will be brought out."

"Oh, Judge, I know I promised you today not to ask questions and not to interfere—I know I agreed to put the whole thing in your hands—but, but—oh, everything is happening so suddenly—and I'm beginning to be sorry, almost, that I consented to do what you advised. Judge Priest, don't you think it would be better if we waited a little and looked around before reaching a final decision?"

"Ma'am," he said with terrific solemnity, "you will recall that we went over that point together, not once't but several times, this mornin'? You'll recall that after holdin' out fur quite a spell you eventually agreed with me that your son had got entirely out of your

control? That you admitted, ef he wuz to be saved frum the consequences of your own folly and his, that he must be separated frum you and surrounded by stronger restrainin' influences than wuz possible here in his home? That you signed a document by which you gave your full, free, unconditional consent that, ez a minor, he should follow after any course of my choosin'?"

"Oh, please, Judge, please don't go over all that again! Yes, I own up that you're entirely right in what you say. Only, it seems to me now, as I look back on it, that you swept me off my feet. Suppose Forry shouldn't like it where you want to send him? He's so set in his likes and dislikes, you know. And after all, I'm his mother, you know, Judge Priest!" The poor lady's voice rose to a plaintive bleat. "I'm sure I'm grateful to you for everything you've offered to do—but—but——"

"Ma'am, excuse me fur interruptin' you, but it's too late fur all these here buts. Your son has been booked fur a period, not of months but of years, under a system of trainin' that'll make a real man out of him ef anything will. He's been accepted—he'll leave here tonight to git started in."

"Tonight?—Oh, Judge!"

"Yessum, tonight. The way I look at it, the sooner he's in the hands of his future instructors and gittin' acquainted with his future companions, the better it'll be fur him

and fur you, too. I entertain a most high opinion, ma'am, of the opportunities he'll have from now on. He'll be taught to take orders and to obey 'em, so that later on he'll be qualified to give 'em and to see that they are obeyed. He'll have the kind of discipline he needs. He'll have good, wholesome food to eat, and plenty of it. He'll be taught how to keep his body healthy, and he'll be taught how to use his hands, and he'll be taught that the highest tribute he kin pay his country is to serve her in peace and, ef needs be, in war. The course calls fur a heap of travelin' 'round—he'll git a liberal education frum seein' the world. But, to my way of thinkin', the most valuable part of the whole proposition is that your son will stand on a basis of absolute equality with a fine crowd of his young fellow-Americans, drawed frum every walk of life. Ef there's one outstandin' thing about this here school, it is that it's absolutely democratic in all its tendencies. No scholar puts on any special airs where your boy's goin', ma'am; they've got ways of discouragin' any such inclinations on anybody's part."

"But, Judge, that doesn't sound like a preparatory school to me. It sounds more as though, almost, it might be a—a——" She fumbled the ugly word.

"One minute, ma'am!" His tone took on an added sternness. "This is no glorified reform school that your son's enterin'—under-

stand that. Ef he wuz an incorrigible, ef he wuz vicious, ef he wuz incurably and hopelessly perverse, they wouldn't take him in, and I wouldn't ast 'em to take him in, neither. He's goin' where there'll be every incentive provided to make him proud of his station and proud of bein' an American, and proud of his uniform. Ez a matter of fact, he's already showin' pride in his face and his bearin', both. I'm pleased to be able to state, ma'am, that the entire idea seemed to appeal to Forrest frum the start."

"Did you say 'uniform'? Is it a military school, Judge?"

"Not exactly, ma'am, although there's some trainin' of a more or less military aspect connected with it. You see, ma'am——"

The mystified lady broke in on him: "Judge Priest, you've been telling me all these other things so fast that you've forgotten to tell me the name of this school and where it's situated, and all?"

"No'm, I ain't exactly furgotten—I've been holdin' back that main fact on purpose. I'm aimin' that Forrest should tell you, ez a kind of a little culminatin' surprise party fur you. That was my own notion, and I got him to agree to it. He's settin' outside now, in his car, and he'll start right on up to the house jest ez soon ez I call to him out of the window that you're waitin' fur him. By the way, he's dressed in the rig he'll be wearin' frum now on,

too—I told him you ought to have a chance to be amongst the very first to see how he sets it off. Of course, his own uniforms won't be ready fur him to try 'em on till probably some days after he's got started in, but it so happened there wuz another young feller of about his size at the—at the office where we fixed up matters this evenin', and this other young feller has been attendin' the same classes that Forrest will go into—in fact, frum whut I kin learn, he's one of the brag scholars—and he very kindly loaned us one of his spare outfits fur Forrest to put on so's you could see how it looks on him and the general cut of it and the color and all. He'll be up there inside of ten minutes or less. Well, I believe that's all fur the present, ma'am, and so, ef you'll please excuse me, I'll jest say good-by."

He rang off and moved across the room to the east window and waved a signal with his pudgy arm. A runabout with a single occupant had been standing at the Washington Street curb. As the car moved off, the old man indulged in a habit he had of talking to himself:

"Well, sir," he said, as though addressing an invisible auditor, "I only hope that the lady I've jest been talkin' to is settin' down in a chair when her son walks in on her. Then, ef she should faint, she ain't got so fur to fall. It's liable to be consider'ble of a shock to her, seein' him fur the first time in them sailor-boy

clothes. I have full confidence in and unbounded admiration fur our glorious United States navy—but I must say its rank and file do wear a mighty curious costume—that there fried aig cap, f'rinstance, and that funny shirt with the big, floppy collar on it, and them britches that ain't got no galluses to 'em, but jest seem to stay up the best way they kin!"

When he has reached this point in his narrative it is customary for Judge Priest to redirect his hearer's attention to that treasured photograph of his. It is a photograph of a young man wearing the uniform of his country, not an especially handsome young man and not an especially becoming uniform.

"See them three medals pinned onto his breast?" he says. "Two frum our own gover'mint and one frum the French, with love and kisses. Quite a tasty little display they make, don't they? Well, I wish to state to you that he come by 'em honest. He walked through the fiery furnaces to earn 'em. You don't git such medals as them fur knowin' the most texts at Sunday school. Lemme tell you how he come to earn 'em, and then you'll understand better'n ever whut kind of a man this here boy of mine's turned out to be. I like to call him my boy. Ez near ez I kin judge, he likes fur me to do so, too. His mother don't appear to mind it, neither. Ef she's ever jealous over my claimin' him this way, she don't let on."

Then follows a recital in the Judge's most graphic and most intentionally ungrammatical manner, of a sequence of events, — the telling of it may or may not stir you; it depends on your feelings. It is a story of how, under regulations and training, a certain youth was transformed from a potential liability to an indubitable asset of his race and his nation; of how, having praiseworthily completed his term of enlistment just about that time, back in 1917, when war with the Central Powers impended, he sought admission to the Marine Corps as offering, in his opinion, excellent opportunity for actual combat service; of how, in the middle and latter parts of 1918 his desires touching on combat service amply were gratified; and finally of how, just before Armistice, he acquired a commission and with it the aforesaid medals—not a very unusual story, but such a one as a good many Americans like to hear told even now, when war-time tales are, curiously, rather out of vogue.

Generally the old Judge concludes, substantially, after this fashion:

"So whut I say is that this country never made a better investment fur the price than this here one proved to be. His mother—and say, takin' her by and large, she's about the proudest woman in this end of the state—she likes the picture of him ez a young officer, with the bars on his shoulder-straps, but personally, I favor this one showin' him while

he still wuz only a sergeant. I carry it 'round with me purty constant, and once't in awhile, when I'm alone, I like to take it and say to myself that I'll bet old Bedford Forrest, up in Glory, stands out in the golden streets and gives that old-time screech of his every time he thinks of how this here namesake of his come through the test. I wouldn't put it past him to call in Jubal A. Early and old man Kirby Smith to help him holler. Them three, and also several others I might name, may 'a' died onreconstructed, but I figger the Old Grudge must be settled Up Yonder jest the same ez 'twas furever settled here on earth on the day when our boys, South and North, lit in to lick the daylights out of them fool Germans. Yes suh, I'll risk any amount in reason that the rest of the Saints must be purty well acquainted by now with the sound of that there old Rebel Yell."

CHAPTER VII

THIS HERO BUSINESS

BY RIGHTS this narrative should appear in a table of contents somewhere back of a magazine cover showing two decrepit veterans, one in blue with a peaked cap, the other in gray with a slouch hat, clasping hands beneath the flag of a more or less reunited country. Or, if the magazine strove to be one of these right-up-to-the-minute magazines, the cover design would be that of a little child placing a memorial wreath upon a grave, with a sort of cloud effect of figures above her, featuring, among others, a Valley Forge fencible, an Andy Jackson rifleman, a Mexican War dragoon, a Gettysburg defender, a ninety-eight Rough Rider and an A. E. F. doughboy; in short, an allegorical and panoramic design. For this is a Decoration Day story, having to do with a thing which happened May 30, of the year 1922, in the town of Shawnee Run, Indiana. The fact that it is being printed a good long while after last Decoration Day and a considerable

while before next Decoration Day may seem a bad business. But, either way, it makes no material difference in Shawnee Run. Shawnee Run is used to being six miles off the main road and six months behind the times.

In your day, if ever you have strayed from the beaten track anywhere in our glorious Middle West, which is so called because it is nowhere near the Middle and a long stretch this side of the West, you must have seen a score or more of Shawnee Runs. You pick out a bit of frayed selvage on the fringes of the Corn Belt and there you assemble a collection of a hundred and fifty-odd houses, mainly wooden houses, white with green shutters. You string most of these houses like beads upon a cord along a length of rutty main street which is all mud when it rains and all dust when it doesn't. Populate the spot with six hundred and forty individuals of assorted native types. To be on the safe side, make them nearly all the children and the grandchildren of two streams of immigration which met and mingled here to build a good strong American stock, one a stream of early settlers coming up out of Virginia and the Carolinas across Tennessee and Kentucky, bringing with them predilections for hot biscuit and the straight Democratic ticket, but the others trickling in from Connecticut and northern New York, and they leaning strongly toward Old Line Republicanism and elm trees in the

front yard. To give the proper racial flavor, sprinkle this mixture with a few foreign-born—not too many, but still a few—say, one merchant tailor, Jewish; one dealer in fresh fruits, Italian; one proprietor of the Busy Bee quick lunch, Grecian; but all the rest must have Celtic or Anglo-Saxon or Teutonic names, excepting two families of Pennsylvania Dutch ancestry and another of the old Huguenot strain, stirred in for good measure.

At the edge of town trace out a winding yellowish creek, with fine tall trees on its banks, and schools of small pan-fish in the deep holes below the drift jams left by the last high water. Put in three churches for religion's sake and a moving picture grotto for week-day entertainments; also a garage and a couple of filling stations. Establish your burying place a mile and a half from town in a weed field, which insists on thinking it is a cemetery. Shake gently, and take some summery afternoon when you've nothing else particularly to do. That's Shawnee Run, and you'll find it mildly pleasant and soothing to the taste.

Shawnee Run may be forty minutes, by Tin Lizzie, from the county seat and an all day's run from the Lincoln Highway, but it has its town characters and its town institutions just as larger communities have them, and has also its traditional claims to fame. For instance, a man who once was favorably mentioned by himself and several of his friends for the nomi-

nation for vice-president lived in Shawnee Run. From a state-wide standpoint this may not mean so much; Indiana puts forth vice-presidential candidates as the haw bush her haws. But it means a great deal, historically, to Shawnee Run. Likewise it is the birthplace of one of the most masterly and compelling orators in the present Lower House of Congress. This great man lends lustre to another state now and has done so since his early manhood, but here it was he first saw the light of day, and his former fellow-citizens are proud of the circumstance. There is an Indian mound just behind Biggs & McKenna's general store. In fact, the back end of the store butts right into the mound; you can dig into it almost anywhere and find arrow points and flint scrapers. There is a Lovers' Leap two miles up the creek on the big bluff. Old Tippecanoe Harrison himself addressed a political rally here in the summer of 1841. The big hickory under which he spoke is still standing out in Camp Meeting Grove near the iron bridge and frequently is pointed out to strangers. And finally, yet for the purposes of this narrative, foremost, it has had its official military heroes, two in number.

For a long while, though, it had only one—Captain Jere Rudolph, late of the One Hundred and Twenty-first Indiana Volunteers. Then, in the late fall of 1918, about the time the Armistice was signed, young Mort Overstreet came back from France, all crippled up, to

make the second. By virtue of rule of seniority if for no other reason, it is fitting that, briefly, we first should consider the former.

For a good many years Captain Rudolph reigned, as the phrase is, supreme. Originally or, that is to say, immediately after the Civil War, there had been among the residents of Shawnee Run some ten or a dozen men who helped to hold the Union and loose the slave. Those were the times when there was an old soldier vote to be reckoned with, and politicians catered to it and played up to it and made the Bloody Shirt to wave in the breeze and drip anew. But one by one these others got old and grew fragile; one by one they sickened and dropped off. So, in due time, it came to pass that G. A. R. hall, upstairs above Kane's wagon-shop, was taken over by the Woodmen of the World and, of the members of the Post only Cap'n Jere survived; one rusted but dependable link left to bind Shawnee Run's memories in with the chain of its country's war-time glories, Cap'n Jere alone remained and he remained intact. It would seem that he meant to linger on forever. At any rate, he looked as though this might be his intention.

The years might nibble at him but they didn't bite in deeply. Generally, a man on reaching a certain age becomes paunchy and pouchy, or else he wastes away to a great thinness and the frame of his bones bends in and bends out like a trellis no longer able to bear

the fading life draped over it. But Cap'n Jere stayed square and firm as a brick smokehouse. In fact, he rather would put you in mind of a smokehouse, a little solid one, built to stay. He was a small sandy-red man with a bullet head and short neck and humorous eyes. He was a widower and childless. He had some money laid by from his more active years and this and his pension kept him in comfort. He was past sixty before the white began to show, like silver wires, in his sorrel hair. He was getting along toward seventy before his legs began to skew under him and he needed a cane to walk with. He had carried a cane before then, but for dignity's sake merely. Now he needed it. To the people of his home town he was a human symbol and inheritance of their patriotism and, by that same token, an institution. To them somehow he typified all differing shapes of the nation's bygone defenders, the shadow and the substance, the living and the dead. He was their cross-belted Continental, their Revolutionary minute-man, their fringed and leggined frontiersman, their partisan ranger, their first of Lincoln's first Seventy-five Thousand. He made speeches on important occasions. He loved to make speeches. He was prominent at gatherings; no one disputed with him his right to the place of prominence. He was a public citizen and a public character. He was Shawnee Run's official hero.

Excuses were to be made for his occasional

outbreaks of testiness, also for his inclination to repeat the same stock stories over and over again. Naturally a man who'd fought as bravely as Cap'n Jere had would have a high and touchy temper; choler marching with courage. And why shouldn't a man who had done spunky deeds on the field of battle be permitted, yea encouraged, to tell about them? Wasn't listening to him just about the same as reading history out of a book? And wasn't history frequently tiresome although important? Well, then?

It is true that when the Yanko-Spanko affair came along his glory suffered an eclipse. But it was only a partial eclipse and not for long. It would appear that Cap'n Jere resented the project of sending troops to make the Cubans free almost as one might resent a personal insult. It was as though he felt slighted somehow; as though, for the time being, his war and its survivors were being brushed aside to make way for a lot of bumptious amateurs. He couldn't understand, either, why an old company commander, still in the prime of his health and strength, knowing how to handle men and not afraid of the smell of powder smoke, wasn't offered a commission. He spoke of the whole thing as a picnic. He called the first land encounter with the enemy a skirmish. The hysterical newspapers might speak of it as an engagement and a battle. He knew better —it was a skirmish, a brush between outposts. In his war it wouldn't have counted. They

had battles then as were battles. Take Cold Harbor, now—or Shiloh or Missionary Ridge.

When he said this, on an evening in front of Biggs & McKenna's—and would have said much more except that he was interrupted—one of the assembled audience had the presumption rather to take issue with him. It was Banks Ferguson who took on the sacrilegious job of interruption.

"Well, say now, Cap'n Jere, you look here!" Ferguson said. "These boys that got killed yistiddy in this skirmish as you call it—ain't they been killed just as dead as anybody you knew that got killed fightin' the Rebels?"

There was a snicker from the group—a snicker of outright approval for the thrust. It was the first time such a thing ever had happened. Before this it would have seemed a sacrilege. In Cap'n Jere's affronted ears it was exactly that—a sacrilege and a mocking. He gave a tremendous snort and turned on his heel and went briskly away from there. He could put his feet down snappily in '98. His underpinning hadn't begun to sag yet. They didn't start warping on him until ten or fifteen years after that.

He got over his sulks soon, though. News of what happened on a May morning in foreign and far-off parts known as the Philippines previously had given him cheer; other things, subsequently occurring, likewise pleased him mightily. As he came stumping toward the loafing place one hot afternoon those already collected

there saw that his face was red and radiant and they heard him shooting off his favorite expletive at every other step.

"Goddle Midey!" he was saying. "Goddle Midey!"

Once upon a time the Reverend Ames, pastor of the Baptist church, had summoned spirit mildly to remonstrate with Cap'n Jere for his frequent use of certain words. He ventured to remind Cap'n Jere that the Good Book expressly forbade the taking of the name of Deity in vain.

"Why, Goddle Midey, elder!" Cap'n Jere had exploded. "That ain't cussin'! That's just the way I talk!"

Now he burst in among them and his voice, rising to a dominant bellow, submerged all lesser sounds of speech. They stopped talking about whatever it was they had been talking about and listened to him. They had to, that's all; there was nothing else for them to do.

"Goddle Midey, gentlemen! Did you read about what's happened—did you see what it says in the paper? Gen'l Joe Wheeler takin' his boys into action and yellin' to 'em 'Come on, boys—let's give the Yankees hell!' Forgettin', by gummies, that he was fixin' to lick a passel of those Spaniels, or whatever 'tis they call themselves in their native language, and thinkin' he was chargin' into us fellers again. Bet he knew the difference, though, when he hit their line—yes sirree bob!

"Well, it all only goes to show that when they need somebody to lead 'em they pick out one of the veterans, Blue or Gray, it don't make no great matter which. These young West Pointers and these brash state guard officers are good enough for drillin' green hands in camp, I guess, but when the real fightin' starts who do they fall back on? On us old timers, that's who! Yes, sir, the War Department in Washington's got some gumption left even if those blame idiots up at the state-house in Indianapolis don't know enough to answer a letter when a tried and experienced company commander writes in to 'em, offerin' his sword and his services.

"Look at Dewey out yonder at Manila Bay here the other week. He knew what to do, didn't he? He'd learned his trade under old man Farragut. 'Damn the torpedoes—go ahead!'—that's what Farragut said. And Dewey he cut the cables and just sailed in and that chore was chored! And there's Shafter and Lawton and Fitz Lee and Schley and the rest of the batch—all old-timers and all of 'em takin' high rank.

"Now, then, here's little old dried-up Joe Wheeler singin' out to his men to give the Yankees hell! Well, they weren't Yankees this time, but Goddle Midey, I'll promise you that hell was what he gave 'em just the same! He's quite a fightin' man, this feller Wheeler is. He may 'a' fought on the other side from me but you got to give the Devil his dues. I remem-

ber one time down in Mississippi a bunch of those rusty raggety scoundrels of his made me run fifteen miles betwixt sun-up and sunset and then when night-time came on I felt refreshed enough to keep right on runnin' most of the night."

He paused, beaming expectantly. Whenever Cap'n Jere spoke of having run away from the enemy it was customary for some person to say in the tones of a well-simulated surprise: "Why, Cap'n Jere, I didn't know you ever let those Rebels run you!" and then he would gurgle happily and reply: "Run, hey? Why, Goddle Midey, son, there was times when if I'd 'a' had a feather in my hand I'd 'a' flew!" And then, as if acting on signal of drill, all within hearing would laugh heartily.

Members of the present company knew the procedure. They had been schooled in the routine of it—the opening statement by him, the question, the apt retort of the answer, then the rewarding outburst. It was one of Cap'n Jere's most reliable whimsies—a sprightly joke, indeed, but requiring coöperation to bring it out properly.

Having spoken the key line he waited, according to formula. He kept on waiting. For once, no volunteer came briskly in on the cue. A daunting little pause ensued. Two or three men straightened themselves from where they leaned against the front wall of the store and moved off, making rather an ostentatious show

of their departure. Mr. Joel Biggs, head of the firm, started humming "There'll be a hot time in the old town to-night" with almost a theatrical air of absent-mindedness. Sundry others took up the thread of their conversation where Cap'n Jere had riven it. Somebody began snapping his elastic sleeve supporters with an impious little slapping sound. The snub might have been rehearsed beforehand, so perfectly was it acted out.

For a second time, from that same stage, Cap'n Jere made his exit, haughtily, but nevertheless greatly discomfited. He made it to the hateful music of a derisive chuckling and giggling behind him. So far as he personally was concerned, this war with Spain threatened to become an absolute failure. For one thing it was making people irreverent. They'd be poking their fun at religion next.

But pretty soon after that the Spaniards gave in, and in a little while more the ten or twelve volunteers who had gone from Shawnee Run were mustered out and came back, bringing with them a high regard for Southern hospitality but an exceedingly poor opinion of Southern insect life. None of them had been farther away from home than Tampa, Florida; there was but one who got that far. The rest had been detained at Chickamauga or Savannah. And so Cap'n Jere, still the only individual in Shawnee Run who ever had heard the whine of a hostile bullet in the hour of battle was re-

stored to a pedestal which ceased to totter and again became quite firm under his feet.

There this ancient stayed, assured and secure, while a newer generation and a less regardful one than his was growing up about him. It was a season of transition. Even into remote communal backwaters such as Shawnee Run came changes—changes in mode of speech, in mode of action and thought. They didn't exactly creep in; they rode in with the dust of the first automobile; they dropped from the wings of the first passing Wright machine. But excepting that he went game in both legs, and took on a piping tone in his voice; excepting that his head now was snow-white where once it had been the color of rusty iron; and excepting that with passing time he grew a bit more prolix in conversation and a trifle more dictatorial in manner, the patriarch didn't materially change. Then, nine years ago at the other side of the world, there sprang up a thing which was to alter all lesser things on this particular atom of the planetary system.

It took a great war to make a civic institution of Cap'n Jere. It took a little war—a short horse of a war and soon curried—to jostle him on the perch of his neighbors' rearing. It took the greatest of all possible wars utterly to shake him down. Perhaps for his intolerance he deserved overthrowal; perhaps, as the fellow says, he had it coming to him. Undeniably he was overspoiled, vastly puffed up in his own image.

Popular idols often suffer from such failings, to their ultimate undoing. Or perhaps it merely was that in his stubbornness and his conceit he set himself on the path of a mighty storm and the winds of it blew him flat, making shards of his senile vanities and broken potsherds of his pride.

You couldn't put your finger on a definite place and say that here, right here, was where the thing started. In such cases you rarely can do that. Who can make a chart for the beginnings of the formless thing we call public opinion? The point remains that, seemingly all at once, Captain Rudolph became a sort of town jibe. Let him come hobbling into a group and young Joel Biggs or somebody would say, lifting the voice slightly and with a studied air of casualness: "Well, I see by an article in last Sunday's supplement of the Chicago paper that there's already been more casualties in the Battle of Verdoon than the entire list of killed, wounded and missing amounted to in this country from 1861 to 1865." Or young Eddie Boatwright, the rising notary public, would be moved to direct attention to the interesting fact that the total weight of metal fired from the Federal Army's guns in the three days of Gettysburg would have fed the artillery of the Allies for less than twenty minutes on any given day along the western front. And then, if anybody questioned the validity of this statement Eddie had his authority right there to prove he was

right, and would produce it. He would haul out the current month's issue of the *Continental Monthly* and read off the comparative statistics. Figures didn't lie, although in this instance, curiously enough, they seemed to have the faculty of making men grin and cast sidewise glances at a bewildered resentful old face.

These little byplays had a way of taking place whenever Cap'n Jere dropped in; really, the thing amounted to a habit. Pretty soon he quit dropping in. He sat on his front porch and read "The Memoirs of U. S. Grant." There were long spells when he sat there, not reading but just staring at nothing at all. People remarked that the old Cap'n appeared to be ageing mighty fast; he was breaking up like shore ice in a spring thaw. Beyond question, he was less dogmatic, less disputatious than he used to be. He was withdrawing himself into the silences—a most unaccustomed place for Cap'n Jere to be going. Until we get old ourselves we shall never know whether the old feel slights as keenly as younger men and women feel them. In Captain Rudolph's favor the finer phases of Shawnee Run's reverence for what, in its imagination, he typified had always been more or less inarticulate, as the deepest emotions of simple English-speaking folk are apt to be; but this new-born resentment, as it were, for his present sentiments was a thing which might not only be felt but which found expression in word and look, and in grimace and wink.

Even in his absence he served to adorn a moral and point a comic tale. Utterances of his, made in the early stages of European hostilities before he withdrew from village club life —or its equivalent—were remembered and cherished and repeated with variations agreeable and suited to the moment. One utterance in particular was a favorite. It figured frequently in the extensive repertoire of that natural-born but now middle-aged cut-up, Banks Ferguson. His rendition of it, with original interpolations, never failed to win the cordial guffaws of his audience. Altering his heavier tones to a perfect simulation of the other's petulant quaver, he would pipe up after this fashion:

"What kind of a war is this one over in Yourupp as compared with My War? If you know so much, Mister Smarty, you tell me that? Now, mine was a war to save the Union. What does a war that's only affectin' the whole world amount to alongside of that? And squattin' down in a puddle at the bottom of a trench and shootin' away at men two or three miles away where you can't even see 'em —what kind of a way is that to fight? And usin' airplanes and balloons and submarines and pizen gas and tanks and all sorts of new fangdangled contrapshuns—why, it's a machine-made war, that's what 'tis! Why, Goddle Midey, you might just as well ship a lot of self-cockin' post-hole diggers and automatic thrashin' machines up to the front to do your

fightin' for you, and you stay at home and be comfortable. Now, you take My War: You stood right out in the open, man to man, where you could see the whites of the other feller's eyes as he come at you and the color of his insides when you let 'em out of him on the p'int of your bayonet. That was a real war, Amurikin ag'inst Amurikin, not a long-distance affair, like the one these here furriners are carryin' on. Goddle Midey, no sirree bob!"

A good joke is a good joke and this one, being treasured and nursed along, lasted until our own country quit backing and filling and flung herself headlong into the mess on the side of right and decency. From then on for better than a year and a half people had something important to think of and to do. There were volunteer recruits to be patted on the back and cheered as they went away and promised that the whole wide world would be theirs, with the compliments of a generous and a grateful nation, when they came victoriously home again. There were draft boards to be organized. There were Red Cross branches to be formed, war-work campaigns to be set afoot, new flags to be unfurled from virgin flagpoles. Mothers gave their boys, wives gave their husbands, children their fathers. Older men gave of their time and their enthusiasm. The well-to-do, being lifted to heights of sacrifice by the urge of this drive or the needs of that war chest, gave until it hurt. Even after this passage of time, it

still hurts sometimes. Your late donor thinks back on what contributions he made and he rubs a chronic sore spot in his mind. To himself he says he must have been suffering from a spell of temporary insanity.

And through it all, while this hot and burning fever of patriotism ran racing in our nation's veins, the veteran, by general consent as it were, remained in retirement. For him the times were out of joint; his nose, as the saying goes, was out of joint too—dislocated by spry and eager youngsters swelling about in khaki and just yearning to go for the throats of the Heinies. They made a proper modern image of American valor; local sentiment enshrined them, collectively, in the niche that had been left vacant when Cap'n Jere crawled into his hole and pulled the hole in behind him.

He crawled in, as one might say, for keeps, after the people of Shawnee Run, regardless of race, creed or politics, confederated together following the declaration of a state of war for a grand patriotic rally. The committee on arrangements met in Lawyer Dave Lucas's office to map out the program and the Reverend Ames suggested that Captain Rudolph and after him the Honorable Oscar Tawney of Medlarsville be invited to address the meeting.

"Why those two?" asked Mr. Joel Biggs, Senior, sharply.

"Yes, that's what I'd like to know—why them two?" echoed Banks Ferguson.

"Well," said the Reverend Ames, rather taken aback, "it's following a precedent, you know, to have Captain Rudolph speak at all public gatherings—it's grown to be a sort of tradition among us. And Mr. Tawney, having lately been elected county judge and being a man of ripened years and mature judgment, might very well follow him, don't you think?"

"Or in other words," said Joel Biggs, Junior, "you'd have your speakers appear in order of senility, eh?" Joel, Junior, was lately returned from an eastern college where he had taken the full academic course and would shortly enter munitions work, thereby getting himself exempted from the draft. "Well, I'm against it —for one."

"You and me both, Joey," spoke up Banks Ferguson. "It might be all right to have Gabe Tawney to come over from Medlarsville and spout. 'Course he'll try to make out like this is goin' to be exclusively a Dimocrat war—dern him!" Mr. Banks was a steadfast and dependable Republican. "Still, what kin you expect from a hide-bound politician like him? But I'm in favor of leavin' old man Jere off the list altogether. He'd sp'ile the whole blow-out fur us. That's what he'd do—Goddle Mideyin' all over the place—excuse me, Rev'-rend, but that's the fact—and talkin' about what he done at the Battle of Shiloh till everybody was plum wore out. Why, when he spoke at the Fourth of July celebration two

years ago this comin' July—or was it three years ago?—anyhow, it was the last time he did speak—he drooled along about Shiloh till both my legs went so sound asleep that I felt like Rip Van Winkle from the waist down. We don't want to hear no more about the late war; we want to hear somethin' about the present one. And we don't need no imported speakers neither, the way I look at it. This is goin' to be strictly a Shawnee Run affair, ain't that the general idea? All right, then, let's stick to local talent and cut out all the old fossil-backs that're playin' hookey from the graveyard on borrowed time. It's a young man's war; let's hear from the young men. I nominate Joel Biggs, junior, for grand-marshal of the day, and Eddie Boatwright to make the principal talk. Eddie's well read and a hustler and he'll know how to make it snappy."

As it turned out, Eddie Boatwright did make it snappy. He had the gift of the apt word and the whiplash metaphor. His development into a seasoned orator dated from this auspicious début. He became the best four-minute speaker in the county and was sent all over the State, rousing the people and having complimentary pieces printed about him in the papers. So quite naturally and as a matter of course he was chosen to make the address of welcome when Mort Overstreet come back from France in November of 1918, stepping

stiffly on a composition leg which creaked slightly in the hinges when Mort put his weight down on it. The old Captain wasn't on hand when this great event took place, either. He wouldn't have fitted into it, probably. At any rate he stayed in the hole of his own digging that had been pulled in behind him, getting older and feebler by the hour, and without a contest, and by common consent, the invalided Overstreet took over the honors and the duties of being Shawnee Run's official hero in succession of Captain Jere Rudolph, removed.

The incumbent had no youthful rivals, either. Shawnee Run's military contingent had been remarkably lucky or, dependent upon one's point of view in such matters, remarkably unlucky. Of her quota for war service only a few had actually gone overseas and a fewer number still had seen the front lines. There were but two Gold Star mothers in town when the fighting ended and in both instances their boys had died of diseases in cantonments on this side of the salt water. Not a single soldier from Shawnee Run had been wounded in battle. By one of those curious quirks of the laws of chance, her sons had gone unscathed while communities no larger suffered heavily, and black-clad women in this house and that wore on their crepe armlets the gilded asterisk which is in token of the supremest measure of devotion a woman can offer to her country.

The one exception to the rule of immunity from physical bemanglement was this spindly youth, Mort Overstreet. It seemed that while he lay ailing one night in April, in a hospital near a French place referred to by him as the town of Barley Duck, a German airman had sprinkled the area with bombs and he, huddled and shriveling under his blankets, had been one of the victims. So now he was back home again, most honorably maimed, with a wound stripe on his sleeve, and on his left breast one of those French Craw de Gears. Here, by grannies, was a home town boy who'd been decorated by the French government for meritorious conduct and fortitude under suffering, and kissed on both his cheeks by one of their biggest generals! Shawnee Run, from Mr. Joel Biggs, Senior, her richest citizen, to the smallest small boy trailing Mort in dumb adoration, felt that she owed him homage and bestowed it freely.

Howsomever, when the first glamourous sheen of his home-coming wore off, it was not to be denied that the new idol proved somewhat a disappointment. The trouble with him seemed to be that except for his limp he was exactly the same gangling Mort Overstreet who had gone away in the spring of 1917—the same slow talking, slow moving, spraddle-armed young person. Discipline had not made him smart or alert; it had not made him tidy of dress. If anything, he seemed more

slouchy and more indolent than he had been before he went for a soldier—and that was saying a good deal. In the interests of truth, it must be admitted that, once the glamour of his return faded, Mort failed most signally to live up to the idealistic conceptions of his rôle.

Anyhow, the war was over now—Germany had thrown up both hands and quit—and people were getting normal again. With normality came calmness. If war is glory gone on a drunk, surely the first six months of peace is the next morning after the jag. And besides you cannot go off into a high fever without having a let-down feeling when your blood cools. That's merely human pathology. Moreover, we had been told that this was a holy war against unholy war; that when it had been won, peace would come to distracted mankind everywhere. Instead, the Great War, like a foul sow, was farrowing a whole litter of lesser wars, a brood of fresh feuds and new dissensions. People felt, somehow, they had been cheated. Disillusionment and distaste nearly always follow in the cooling train of a forced and stimulated enthusiasm.

Now, Shawnee Run, in common with the rest of the country, had for many months been swallowing sublimated enthusiasm in great gulps. The need for taking the medicine having passed, her communal stomach naturally turned slightly sour. Don't set her down

as being in any temperamental regard different from the rest of the country. For in so doing you would be grossly unjust. She was not of a cruel temper; she merely was typical. With patience and a fine pen the Lord's Prayer may be written on the back of a postage stamp. It has been done before now, and although you may need the microscope with which to read it, it still is the full and complete Lord's Prayer with every *i* dotted and every *t* crossed. And Shawnee Run was, and still is, America reduced to a minute scale—no better and no worse in proportion than a larger town or a smaller. You will recall how, when the first of our combat divisions returned from foreign service, New York went wild over the victorious legions as they marched through Fifth Avenue beneath triumphal arches. But two years later, when some stray remnants of the A. E. F. landed, having done garrison duty for so long in Germany, the lone policeman who met them as they filed off the transport was in doubt whether he should run them in for having no visible means of support or for parading through a public thoroughfare without a permit. He couldn't arrest them for causing a crowd to collect, because they didn't cause any crowd to collect. And Shawnee Run is merely New York City as prescribed by a homeopath.

Be all this as it may and undoubtedly is, the point I am trying to get at is that public

opinion in its reactions toward one-legged Mort Overstreet presently showed decided and chilling modifications. Perhaps I can best sum it up in the progressive stages of its cooling-off by quoting here three representative citizens, speaking separately and on succeeding occasions. First, we have Mr. Banks Ferguson, addressing a sympathetic group of listeners some two months after the close of hostilities:

"Say, takin' him by and large, ain't he turned out to be about the dumbest imitation of a conquerin' hero ever you seen in your life? Here the Ladies' Aid goes and gets up a congratulation party at the Methodist church specially on his account. He's to be the center of attraction, with everybody shakin' hands with him and Presidin' Elder Burris all organized to make a complimentary speech about him right to his face. And what does he do? Smack in the middle of things he ups and disappears and later on we find out that he's sneaked away and gone on home and went to bed. Says he's gittin' tired of bein' fussed over; says if anybody's interested in his case they might spend a little time findin' out why his back pay is bein' held up on him. That's gratitude for you—ain't it? And try to git him to tell you somethin' about the war or how a battle looked or the way one of them big shells sounded when it went off close to you—just try, that's all. He'll start in with a whole pack of drivel about sailin' on a certain trans-

port on a certain date under a certain captain and landin' on a certain date and bein' in camp for so long and then movin' up to such and such a place and stayin' there for so long, and so forth and so on. Or else, what he wants to tell you about is a sergeant named Murphy that he didn't like, or about them funny little French locomotives that they have to pull their trains for them over there, or about cooties, or how they don't measure distance over there by miles the way civilized people do, but by killymeeters, whatever they are. Or else he'll talk about the mud—just mud, mud, mud. He's got mud on the brain. Seems like, to hear him tell it, he didn't see nothin' over there for months on a stretch except mud and killymeeters. Well, these here killymeeters may a-been more or less of a novelty, but who wants to hear about all them different grades of foreign mud when we've got a mighty superior domestic brand right here at home? You take that piece of Main Street up toward the bridge on a thawy March day followin' after a hard winter and I'll back her for mud ag'in the world. . . . Honest, Mort Overstreet gits me plum' outdone with him sometimes, the way he acts. I only hope next time we have a war there'll be somebody goin' from here who'll have the noodle to furnish a few of the real details for local consumption when he gits back."

Imagine the lapse of six months more and

hearken to Mr. David Lucas, attorney at law, also real estate and loans, farm mortgages a specialty. This is Mr. Lucas speaking:

"Well, sir, he was in here again yesterday wanting to know why that mix-up about his disability allowance hadn't been straightened out yet up at Washington. That makes the third time in less than a month he's come to my office or else waylaid me on the street to pester me about that blamed claim of his. Didn't I take his case as an act of charity? Didn't I write to my close friend, Jake Hargis, asking him to give the matter his personal interest? Didn't I get a letter back from his secretary, practically by return mail, saying that just as soon as suitable opportunity offered the secretary would bring the matter to Congressman Hargis's attention? Did't I turn that letter over to Overstreet? Don't he know that the government is still all snarled up over all these new problems? Hasn't he got any consideration, any patience?

"But oh shucks, what's the use! Where does he get off anyhow, to be bleating around like that? Why, he didn't even get hurt in action. As a matter of fact, I doubt whether he ever saw any real action. From all I can learn, he was twenty-odd miles back of the lines when that bomb shell dropped and blew his leg off. It was practically, as you might say, an accident—almost like being kicked by a mule or run over by a truck or messed up in

a sawmill or something; and yet he had doctoring and nursing, the best of care from the government. . . .

"Say, some of these returned veterans of ours give me a pain anyway. They're getting their vocational training and their allotments of reclaimed waste lands, or anyhow they will get 'em in due course of time when the government gets round to those details. And while they're waiting why, in the name of all that's holy, don't they go to looking for jobs instead of loafing about, acting like they thought the country owed 'em a free living for the rest of their natural lives? . . . How's that, Tobe? —hard for a crippled boy to get a job, you say? Well, so far as I recall, Mort Overstreet never exactly lost his eyesight looking for a job of work while he still had both his legs." (Applause.)

Thirdly, let us overhear what the senior Mr. Biggs, head of the firm of Biggs & Son, successors to the old established concern of Biggs & McKenna, and Shawnee Run's most affluent and influential citizen, has to say. What he says will be worth pondering over, for it is the Voice of Business that speaks through him and Business, we must admit, has had just cause for grievance and resentment in these distressing post-war days:

"And now it's to be a bonus act, eh? Well, I'm flat against it. You men can tell anybody you please that I'm flat against it. That's

exactly what I told this young cripple, Overstreet, no longer ago than this morning right in this store. We're being eaten up with taxes as it is. And now, on top of all the rest, it seems we're going to be called on to pay a few billions for a bonus. What I want to know is, did this bunch fight for their country through patriotic motives or did they fight for money through mercenary motives? Nobody seems to appreciate that those who stayed at home did their share, too, and carried the burden and footed the costs. Why, my back is broke right now from paying for the load of Liberty Bonds and Victory Bonds that I've got over there in my safe. I could get big interest on the money if it wasn't all tied up in government securities. But you don't hear me kicking. Only, I must say this: Just let Congress try to shove us into the next fool war that comes along and then you'll see whether the business men of this country will rally like they did this last time!"

This brings us up to Decoration Day of 1922. Most years Decoration Day had not meant a very great deal to Shawnee Run. The banks and the stores closed; some families went picknicking and some heads of families went fishing. Those who visited the neglected and treeless burying ground, a mile and half from town, did so as individuals and not under organized auspices.

This year, though, Shawnee Run was signally

favored by the high gods of coincidence. The Honorable Gilbert J. Gifford, that distinguished Representative from a far-away district, who, half a century before, conferred an everlasting honor upon the town by being born in it, had returned upon business connected with the settling up of a distant kinsman's estate. See, now, how circumstances dovetailed in with circumstance. It was his visit in thirty years to the cradle of his nativity, as he himself so happily phrased it. He had arrived about the twentieth, meaning to remain a few days only, but legal complications detained him until almost the end of the month. He was an orator of parts—of about all the oratorical parts there are; the walls of the halls of Congress might so attest. As they say in the argot of the ball field, he had everything—speed, control, change of pace, a hot fast one, a slow curve. And in his own appreciative ears the sound of his voice, uplifted in rhythmic elocution, was the sweetest music ever crooned. Being waited upon by a delegation, he graciously agreed to deliver an oration on the thirtieth in commemoration of his country's defenders, both the quick and the dead.

The occasion justified elaboration. By subscription a fund was raised—the Biggses, father and son, heading it with substantial donations—to meet all special and extraordinary expenses. One of the Medlarsville brass bands—not the best one but the other

one—was engaged. A parade by automobile and carriage to the cemetery was planned; the journey if made afoot was a considerable one, especially when the weather was warm. And it usually is warm on the edge of the Corn Belt when spring is melting into summer. The able-bodied members of the local branch of the American Legion—which meant all its members save one—the Boy Scouts, the hardier souls among the Masons and the Woodmen might march if they chose; all others planned to ride. A women's auxiliary, whose function would be to prepare wreaths and garlands for the graves of deceased soldiers, was organized. On the afternoon of the twenty-ninth a volunteer corps of scythemen invaded the graveyard and close mowed its weedy acres, to the great chagrin of various blacksnakes and domiciled field mice. Another squad hammered together a wooden stand for the speakers and the guests of honor, furnishing it with a double row of benches and finishing it off with strips of bunting in the national colors.

Decoration Day morning came in hot and humid, with clear skies but with the lurking threat of an abrupt change of weather in the moist stickiness of its air. Because the second-best Medlarsville band had to take part in a forenoon parade at home and so could not drive across country from the county seat until after that job was finished, the formal

exercises in Shawnee Run were to begin at two P.M. This gave the members of the ladies' auxiliary ample time for carrying their memorial offerings to the graveyard. Not all the graves of the soldiers dead there were marked, for some had died neglected and some had died poor. Making sure that no mound deserving of the tribute should be slighted, the good women sowed their flowers broadcast. Thus it befell that more than one unknown sleeper who never in his life had put on either Union blue or Yankee khaki had now a garland for the breast of that uniform of green sod which he, in common with all in that place, wore. One is led to hope that in the eyes of the Great Captain such mistakes are gracious and good.

The parade was to start sharp on the hour. Those in charge—the grand marshal and his aides—were determined it should move promptly, and worked valiantly to that end; so it got under way shortly after three o'clock, the band leading. In the first car following it, holding thus the prime place of distinction—a car with the top turned back—rode Congressman Gifford with Mr. Lucas, Mr. Boatwright, and the Messrs. Biggs. The next car bore Shawnee Run's two Gold Star mothers and the pastors of three local churches. On the rear seat of the third car sat, side by side, Shawnee Run's pair of best known ex-fighting men, Captain Jere Rudolph sitting on the right, young Mort Overstreet on the left. Marching

bodies, secret order lodges in full regalia, and citizens generally made up the tail of the procession. It passed out Main Street and over the Iron Bridge in a thick yellow dust cloud of its own raising.

At the outset there had been doubt in the minds of some of those in authority as to whether Captain Rudolph would be willing to favor by his presence the services of the day. He had grown perceptibly feebler of late, and somehow seemed sort of distant and stand-offish toward people generally—sort of shy. Yes, shy was really the better word of the three to describe it. Someone suggested that he might harbor jealousy for the younger man who, for a season at least, practically had usurped his place in the regard of the community, and might, for such a reason, decline to make a public appearance with the junior veteran. But seemingly Cap'n Jere had laid aside jealousy along with most of the other vanities of this life. When the Reverend Ames, as spokesman for the committee on arrangements, called upon him at his cottage and urged his participation, to the end that the great event might properly be rounded-out and made complete, the octogenarian gave his consent promptly. So doing, he showed a faint trace of his one-time sprightliness.

"I've been sort of calculatin' that the next time I wore my Grand Army clothes out to that there cemetery I'd be stayin' on per-

manently after the rest of the folks had come on back to town," he said. "So I can't scarcely say but what I'm willin' to take the jaunt with a reasonable guarantee of finishin' it out as a round trip. Maybe me and young Overstreet might enjoy visitin' with each other, too, during the ride—I figure we'd be likely to have somethin' congenial to talk about. I may not git down street more'n about once in a coon's age these days, but, even so, I manage to keep track of things generally. . . . Yes, elder, you may tell the rest of the committee I'll be all dressed up and ready when the rig comes by for me."

But when Tuesday afternoon came his spurt of vivacity appeared to have run its course. He, who once upon a time had been so prolific of speech, seemed now to be concerned with abstracting thoughts which kept him for the most part dumb. Young Overstreet ordinarily was slow of speech, and this day embarrassment had tied his tongue in a double bowknot. There was a suggestion of a deeper emotion than embarrassment in his manner and in his face. It might almost have been suspected to betoken a touch of sullenness—of chronic discontent, say. Still, and even so, that aspect of his might have been due purely to external and physical causes. For he was very hot and suffering visibly from it; so, for that matter, was Cap'n Jere. One other thing, at least, besides silence the two in the third car shared—a steamy and a sticky

feeling. Honoring the occasion, Cap'n Jere had turned out in his heavy black slouch hat with the gold cord and the lettering on it and his thick blue coat with its brass buttons. As for Mort Overstreet, he was in no better case, being snugly encased in the winter-weight uniform he had worn home from hospital. So it may have been merely a bodily discomfort rather than harassing sensations which gave to his face that rather morose and unhappy look which it wore. However, few persons, if any, took cognizance of his attitude or Cap'n Jere's, either. The eyes of all beholders were naturally upon the front car where the great man rode with his guard of honor.

Through the first three-quarters of an hour the ceremonies at the cemetery hardly could have gone forward more auspiciously than they did go. Of course, when the band played "The Star Spangled Banner" the assemblage, trying to sing it, made rather a hash of the job. Still, they did as well as most of us could have done had we been there. It is an admitted fact that no native-born American knows the lines of our national anthem all the way through to the last verse, and certainly no one excepting an adolescent youth whose voice is changing can carry the tune of it. But following the opening prayer, the bandsmen blared forth the air of the Battle Hymn of the Republic and then all hands came splendidly in with the words of "John Brown's Body". Trust an Indiana crowd

to carry that old marching song along with a glorious swing and sway to it! When they came to the chorus, Mort Overstreet, singing under his breath, rendered it according to a version which found popularity with the overseas contingent. This way:

"All we do is sign the payroll,
All we do is sign the payroll,
All we do is sign the payroll——
And we never draw a gol dam cent!"

But only Cap'n Jere, alongside him, heard the parody or marked the ironic emphasis of the singer's tone.

Next, on being introduced with fragrant sentences of praise by Mr. Eddie Boatwright, the orator of the day went at it grandly. He led off appropriately with a quotation from a standard work of poetry. He invoked the shades of America's warrior hosts to hearken to the words he now would speak; the inference was that if they did so they would enjoy a rare treat. In uplifting sonorous measures he drew a symbolic image of the flag of our country, with particular reference to what the flag meant personally to him. He made it plain—no, that's not right; he made it fancy—that he heartily endorsed the flag. He approved the estate of motherhood. Home ties had from him the strongest of commendations. He told how liberty had been born on this continent when the soil of the land sprouted with the blades of bayonets like the blades of the corn and how

out of the fiery furnaces of battle, our civilization had been smelted.

A captious critic and one uninspired by the prevalent mood of the moment might have detected in Congressman Gifford's manner a hint that he rather fancied himself to be probably the most conspicuous and finished product of this same civilization of which so glowingly he spoke. But his hearers, without exception, found his utterances to their liking and so indicated. Well, it was a good speech, as Congressman Gifford full well knew. In all the eight times heretofore that he had delivered it, it never yet had failed him. Approaching his climax he lifted both arms above his handsome iron-gray head:

"And so, my friends," he cried out, his voice quavering as though it came forth through sobs choked back, "and so, my dear friends, to-day we gather in this sacred spot, hallowed to us by precious associations and made beautiful by the tender and loving hands of gentle womanhood. And as here we mingle with these gallant returned heroes of the Great World War whom I see before me and whom we ever shall delight to honor and to cherish and to whom we pledge our grateful devotion, our support and our jealous care now and hereafter—and as here we stand among the last resting places of our sacred dead of other and lesser wars, whose gallant memories and valorous deeds we always shall treasure in the caskets of our souls,

I raise my reverent eyes to yonder dome of pure and flawless blue and——"

Matching the action to the cue of the words he did indeed lift his eyes and then and there, for the first time in his life, Congressman Gifford was guilty of starting to paint a vocal masterpiece and then leaving it unfinished. He looked aloft—and broke off his apostrophe in midflight. All of his audience looked where he had looked and a nervous titter ran through their ranks. For overhead, the flawless blue dome just referred to had magically vanished. In that same moment the sunshine had been cut off. Out of the west, while they listened with senses enchained by his eloquence, a great black cloud, swollen and heavy with unspilt rain, had been swiftly rolling and spreading. It was now upon them, promising one of those torrential tropical downpours which seem so oddly out of place in temperate North America but which nevertheless persistently occur about once in so often in our summer times.

Even as Congressman Gifford fumbled for his next word the first gross drops fell, spatting like clots in their upturned faces and making fat stipples where they struck in the dust on spots from which the turf was worn away. Another instant, and a bolt of forky-tailed lightning ripped asunder the dropsical belly of the heavens and let the deluge down upon them in sheets and waves and flooding vertical cataracts. How that rain did rain! Subsequently the visi-

tation was spoken of as a young cloudburst. It certainly deserved the name.

Decoration Day for Shawnee Run broke up right there. Rather, it was washed out by the roots. Nobody moved to adjourn but everybody moved to depart. Men, women and children, bandsmen, lodgemen, committeemen and all, they sped for shelter. The trouble was, though, that of fitting shelter there was none that side of town. Who would dare tarry under a roadside tree or take refuge beneath an iron bridge when two-pronged lightning was flickering like an infernal tuning fork across the black keyboard of the firmament and evoking the deep bass music of the thunderclaps behind each quivering play of its blazing tines?

Those fleeter of foot reached the parking spaces outside the burying ground fence, flung themselves into the cars, six, eight or ten to a load, and went homeward as fast as the skidding tires could turn. The rest followed afoot—children crying in their fright, women with the hair plastered against their faces and their holiday finery soaked and spoiled, men swearing as the sop ran down the backs of their necks and the mud came sloshing in over the tops of their shoes. Three minutes earlier that road to town had been a ribbon of crinkled dust, ankle-deep. Now it was a yellow batter, all creaming and sticky and slick. Through it they went, slipping and falling. It was a free-for-all foot race, and the prize was to get under

a weather-tight roof and might the Devil take the hindermost.

There were two of the hindermosts. One of them was Cap'n Jere and he never even started. The first plunge of the getaway caught him unawares. One moment he sat in his place on the rear bench of the speakers' stand with a hand cupped behind his good ear the better to hear. The next moment, so it seemed to him, there was a spattering about him and he was being run into and run over; was trying to get upon his legs and having them knocked from under him as often as he tried. Then it was as though a bucket of water had been overturned upon his head. Other bucketsful followed this one. Blinded by the sudden drenching, battered against by more agile bodies, buffeted and bewildered and fumbling, the old man had a confused recollection of being upheld by someone and then, when that other slipped and went down, of seeking to aid him to his feet.

The next thing he knew with sureness was when he found himself gasping and wheezing, down on the earth at the back of the speakers' stand which had been built up into the air, stair-steps fashion. He wasn't out of the rain here. Short of being inside four stout walls there was no escaping the rain. But in this lee he was somewhat protected from the wind which now had come and was blowing the rain before it in slanting streaks like silver lances all aimed the same way. He was holding fast to some

dependable object. As his eyes cleared, he was surprised to discover that this object was a human arm inside of a wringing wet sleeve. Arm and sleeve, it next developed, were the property of his late riding companion, Mort Overstreet. So it must have been Mort who had steered him hither. Mort had done it handily, too, seeing that Mort himself was gimpy.

The rescuer drew the old man down for better shelter beneath the overhang at the rear of the framework. They squatted there, getting wetter and wetter if such a thing were possible for a pair already wet to the point of saturation, but also getting their breath back, which was the main thing. The younger man was the first to speak:

"Well, Cap'n," he said with a sort of slow bitterness, "there don't seem to be but just the two of us left."

"Likely you're right," answered Cap'n Jere. "It would appear that, in a manner of sayin', everybody else has went off and left us behind. Well, speakin' for myself, I'd say that bein' deserted this-away has its advantages. We don't have to listen to anybody makin' an oration about us heroes, do we?"

Young Overstreet stared at him and took puzzled note of a twinkle in the eyes behind the blurred spectacles and of a broad grin that exposed the full strength, uppers and lowers, of the Captain's false teeth. Water coursed in streams down the puckered old face. Dye-stuff,

running from a long strip of tri-colored wash-rag above his head—a wash-rag which was a length of bunting five minutes before—had streaked it grotesquely. The Captain's G. A. R. hat was a sodden mess, its lopped brims resting upon his hunched shoulders. His shoes must be full of water by now; his pockets, too, probably; Mort's were. Yet here he was with that cheerful grin on his face. There was no mirth in the lame boy's soul or in his voice, either, as he spoke again:

"Left us—you bet! Never gave neither one of us a thought, none of 'em. And that big windbag of a Gifford—he was the first one to up and fly. I seen him. One minute swearin' that us World War veterans would always be looked out for by him and the next minute beatin' it through the crowd fur a front seat in somebody's car. What do you know about that?"

"Only what you tell me," said Cap'n Jere, still smiling as at a good joke. "I didn't see him go myself. Still, I wouldn't put it past him—knowin' the run of the breed. I was something of a public speaker myself before I reformed. And public speakers have a cravin' to be out in front."

Apparently the young cloudburst had restored to the old man a measure of his former sprightliness—a freshet from on high livening up a withered century plant.

"Son," he said briskly, "for quite a spell I've

been waitin' my chances to get to have a little talk with you in private. I look on this here rain as sort of providential—it's give me the opportunity without nobody else round eavesdroppin' and everything comparatively quiet. I've been studyin' you—you may not have suspicioned it—but I've been studyin' you, such few times as I've run across you. Unbeknownst to you I was studyin' whilst we were comin' out here together to-day. I think I know what's been passin' through your mind off and on. I figure in a way of speakin', that I've also been goin' through the same things you've went through." He halted to let a particularly loud thunderclap die away in rumblings. "Yes, sir, I wanted specially to talk with you about this here business of bein' a popular hero. It's like almost any other business—it has its ups and downs. I know, because I've been all the way through it and you've only just recently started in to followin' it. Yes, sir, the hero business is certainly a funny kind of business. Snug up a little bit closer and let me tell you some of the ins and outs of it."

There is lack of space and time here for repeating all under this heading that Cap'n Jere had to say. While the storm beat down on him and the ruined bunting drained its paint-box colors upon him he spoke, without interruption from his hearer, for perhaps five minutes. We quote here only his concluding remarks, delivered with a due seriousness:

"I'd say, furthermore, that the difference between your war and mine was that mine lasted so long that the folks at home got used to seein' the results of it about 'em—the human wreckage and all—whilst yours was over and ended so quick that the let-down feelin' come slap-bang when the enthusiasm was still runnin' high and the whole thing was still more or less of a hurrah and a novelty. It left people feelin' like as if they'd spent a whole pile of money on a show and then hadn't got the worth of their money. They fussed over you a lot when you first got back, didn't they? Well, in our case it was different. We just straggled in with our discharge papers in our pockets and went to work again, and whilst everybody here was glad to see us home again there was no excitement. They just took us as a matter of course. Why, Goddle Midey, son, except among ourselves, us veterans wasn't called by our military titles as a general thing. That came later. I reckon the war had been over fully six or eight years before the run of people around here begun callin' me Cap'n Rudolph. Before that I was just plain Jere Rudolph, the saddle-maker. Military titles was a drug on the market then.

"But in due time us fellers that's saved the Union got our proper rewards. Congress quit talkin' about what it was goin' to do for us and really done somethin'. We got political recognition and we got public offices, some of us, and we got our pensions. Some that didn't de-

serve it got on the rolls—coffee-coolers and sutlers and camp followers and the likes of that—even some deserters. There had to be abuses in the system but the main p'int, I take it, was that sooner or later every deservin' veteran was looked after. And you mark my words, son, in due time you boys that fought this last war will get your just deserts, too. You'll hear people goin' round sayin' that republics are ungrateful. That's a lie! Republics ain't ungrateful and they ain't ungenerous, neither—leastwise, I'm here to testify to it that this here one's not. And some of these days you'll be sayin' the same thing about your country that I do. You may feel different about it right now but you won't feel so always.

"Of course a feller that goes into the hero business is liable to make his mistakes, same as in any other line. F'r instance, if he should chance to get crippled up in battle the best thing he can do for his own peace of mind is just to stay right where he fell and die there and be buried there. That'll give the folks at home a chance to carve his name on a nice monument and make fancy speeches about him and appreciate his memory and all. He's no trouble to anybody any more; he's a pleasure and a pride. But if he insists on gettin' well and draggin' himself back, maybe blind or with a timber leg or an empty coat sleeve flappin', he's a trouble and a care. And on top of that, if he goes round lookin' neglected and actin'

reproachful people's consciences start hurtin' 'em and they take it out on him; they git to dislikin' him, because it makes 'em so uncomfortable every time they see him, to think that maybe they're shirkin' their own responsibilities in the premises. I ain't blamin' em so much for it, neither—it's only human nature. And nearly everybody suffers more or less from human nature.

"But there's one yet greater mistake you can make in this hero business—and that's the mistake of livin' too long. Don't live too long, son—take my advice and don't stay on and on till the hero business quits payin' its regular dividends." One tremulous hand stole out and patted his companion on his wet shoulder. "Don't hang on till you lose step with the procession and your pet stories git to be tiresome and folks begin callin' you a pesky old nuisance behind your back. You maybe think it's hard on you now to be looked on as a burden and you still young and healthy. But wait till you git old and back-numbered and then you'll know—Goddle Midey, boy, you'll know what 'tis then!"

"And yet you just now said republics ain't ungrateful," quoth young Overstreet huskily. He wiped awkwardly at his cheek.

"I said it and I say it again," answered the old man. "They ain't ungrateful. But sometimes they are powerful forgetful! . . . Say, looky yonder! Those clouds are breakin' away

there to the west'ard and the rain's beginnin' to slack off. What say we start hoofin' it towards town? We can't git any damper than what we already are, can we? And neither one of us ain't salt nor sugar, to melt away."

"Think you can make it?" asked Mort.

"Well, we've still got one sound leg between the two of us," said Cap'n Jere, "and we can kind of hold on to one another. Come on, Cumrud, let's try it anyway. Don't mind me callin' you 'Cumrud', do you?"

"'Buddy' was what we used to call a good pal over in France," said Mort.

"Was it? Well, I reckon it's never too late for an old feller like me to try to be up to date. So, Buddy, if you can sort of git braced yourself and then help me up on these here crooketty pins of mine I figure we might make a start."

Somewhat shaken by the effort, he finally stood upright. "Why, Goddle Midey," he said brightly, "what's a brisk little shower to a couple of old campaigners? This storm ain't a patchin' to one I remember we had down in Georgia right soon after the Surrender. Them slickery red clay hills!—I can shut my eyes and see 'em right now!"

"And, say, alongside the mud that we used to plow through over in France that there road yonder looks to me like a paved sidewalk," said young Mort. "Hang on to my arm. That's the ticket. All set, Buddy? Well, then, *let's go!*"

CHAPTER VIII

THE EMINENT DR. DEEVES

THE eminent Doctor Deeves lived in a cottage which fitted into an indent in the high wall of rough field stones that bounded the grounds of his sanitarium on all four of its sides. The front breadth of this wall was the first thing, nearly always, to take the eye of a traveler turning out of the main county turnpike into the quieter byway that led northward past the establishment. It rose up straight and blank and it stretched away for a formidable run of four hundred feet. No gate or gap broke into it; the entrance, which opened on a graveled drive that skirted the east face of the enclosure, was entirely out of sight from the public road. It suggested seclusion and aloofness, which were the intents; and it made a mystery of what might lie back of it, and that was inevitable, and yet perhaps, on the part of its proprietor, not altogether undesirable.

This sanitarium, as it was called in deference to certain popular prejudices, was a place for

the confinement and the care of persons suffering from mental and nervous disorders. It was a private asylum, or as those might say who favored the crueler old English name, a madhouse.

First, the approaching stranger would see the wall, then, coming nearer and alongside, would be aware of a massing of trees behind the barrier and, from one point where the road humped itself over a slight elevation in the earth, he could see—if he continued to look that way—the upper floors of some large buildings, like barracks or dormitories, rising in the middle distance. He must pass on several rods farther before he caught sight of the doctor's cottage where it snuggled into its jog or recess. At the back, the wall was joined to it, so that its rear elevation formed a proper part of the boundary.

It was rather a gay and jaunty little house, with a mottled slate roof on it to relieve the gray of its masonry construction, and with many windows looking out on the flower beds and the narrow strip of lawn which made the approach for it. The passer-by felt that the architect had done well to invest this dwelling with the look of a home, seeing that always it must contend for its cheerfulness against the frowning dominance of that long tall wall, springing away from it on the right flank and the left. But in the summer, awnings and vines and porch furniture helped to give it

brightness. Also, frequently visible, there was a child.

At least, in times gone by there had been a child. Doctor Deeves was a widower with one child, a daughter. At the time this account properly begins, though, she had grown out of childhood into girlhood. Doctor Deeves' wife was dead when he gave up practice in the city to move out here, three miles from the small town of Amitydale, and set up this now famous institution of his.

The daughter's name was Hazel Deeves and at eighteen she was pretty, in a subdued, quiet sort of way. If we bar the servants and a governess she had for a while as a little thing, before Doctor Deeves himself took over the undertaking of her education, and, after that, a housekeeper who served until the little mistress was old enough to assume the domestic duties, these two—the distinguished specialist and the young girl—were the only regular residents that the house in the shadow of the sanitarium walls had ever sheltered. So far back as her memory went it was the one home she always had known; she was a baby on a pillow when her father brought her from the East.

Back there in the East he had been distinguished as an alienist. Now he preferred to be known as a psychiatrist, which to one versed in the shadings of meaning conveyed by the phraseology of his calling marked a change in the doctor's scientific estate. To the layman

the titles might be interchangeable; inside the profession there was a subtle distinction between them. Once upon a time his learned opinions, given in court under the head of expert testimony, had broken more than one will, had saved more than one insane murderer from the chair and had sent more than one sane malingerer to it. Now, in these latter days his reputation more largely rested upon his diagnostic talents and upon his system of treatment—which sometimes worked cures—for unfortunate humans whose brains had gone awry.

To him the work he was doing was of such tremendous importance that he had neither time nor patience for anything else. It held him, to the exclusion of practically all lesser interests. Excepting when he dealt with his own business he had about him an air of supreme absorption, as though his thoughts were too precious for exposure to the common currents of discussion. He had no small talk for company. Also he had about him the cocksureness which so frequently accompanies preeminence in a brilliant man's affairs. You couldn't tell Doctor Deeves anything, because if you agreed with his conclusions that merely was to him added evidence—not that he needed it—to demonstrate that he was right, and if you disagreed with him, why, this then was proof of your blindness or else your stupidity; so, in either event, what you had to say was of no consequence.

Make a mental picture of an arrogant, quick-gaited, generally silent man, with double-lensed glasses riding his nose and with a short harsh beard bristling forth from a stubborn chin and accenting rather than cloaking the clamped and dogmatic set of his lips, and for the purposes of this narrative you have a sufficiently full likeness of the eminent Doctor Deeves. See him once and you would know him again anywhere.

By all outward favors, his daughter was of another cast. She must have taken after her mother; certainly she seemed in no visible way to follow the parental mold. She was a gentle, almost a timid little thing, self-effacing, docile by nature, and in her temperament borrowing a protective coloration from objects about her. It was a strange life she led at eighteen, but no stranger than the life she always had led. Mad people had been her comrades from the hour she reached the age when comradeship began to mean something to her. She had no fear of them, and no distrust. They were, to her, as matter-of-fact as normal playfellows would be to a child brought up in different surroundings.

Her little world, the one she knew the best and loved the best, lay back of the cottage, on the sanitarium's shut-in acres. To the uninformed, viewing the place from without, it conveyed with its walls the impression of being jail-like, so built and so ordered as to insure that its inmates would be safely held. She could not

recall a time when her understanding of the meaning of the boundary had not been a better one. It was set there as a bar against morbid curiosity; its intent was to save those who dwelt within it from prying eyes and mischievous annoyances. It was not their prison wall but a wall of protection for them. Shielded by it, they followed their pursuits and devices, which were many.

The housing of demented folk has gone a long way along the road of compassion and sympathy since the times of Bedlam with its iron chains for the limbs of the insane and its rods for the scourging of their poor backs.

If there are strait-jackets and padded cells and detention harnesses in the modern asylum, the casual visitor does not see them. He sees no maniacs mewing at barred windows. Workshops and reading rooms and rest rooms; singing birds in cages and flowers in pots; comfortably furnished rooms and wards; broad wide sunlit corridors; sometimes isolated cottages whose doors are not locked; pleasant walks winding along under shade trees and across wide smooth stretches of lawns; tennis courts and ornamental gardens—these are what he sees. Excepting for the look out of the eyes of some who live there and except for the gait of some of them—the legs lifted high at each step and then the feet thrown forward with a jerk—it is possible that in his visit he will see or hear scarcely a thing to suggest that these men and these

women, here concerned with their various occupations and diversions, are in any wise abnormal.

This, then, was the sort of place the child, Hazel Deeves, grew up in. Her father's sanitarium was an expensive one. Only those unfortunates whose people might afford to pay well for their keep were sent to him, and only the most scientific, the most merciful and the most advanced methods were here employed. Music, sports, healthful employments, were provided; in the surroundings was all possible beauty and comeliness.

So the child's world was a world of flowers and trees and green grass, and for playmates she mainly had those who in age were adults but who, because of their infirmity, were in thought and habit children. There was a woman who played at dolls with her—a woman whose mind had stopped growing when she was twelve years old. There was an old man with a white beard and a soft brogue in his voice; he took her with him to far corners of the grounds on a search for a little man in a red jacket with a green feather in his hat, who worked magic. He was quite as sure as she was—surer even—that sooner or later they would find this little man.

Another of her favorite companions was also an old gentleman, one with chubby pink cheeks and a benevolent manner. He gave her advice for the fashioning of mud pies and the building

of sand fortresses, but no actual help in their construction. For this there was a reason.

Seen at a distance, he appeared to have both his hands thrust into a curious sort of leather muff, rather like an overgrown roll for carrying sheet music. On drawing nearer one would discover that his wrists were strapped fast inside the device and that a light steel chain which passed through a steel ring in his muff was fastened behind his back with a small lock.

Among all the patients who had run of the outdoor spaces this old man alone wore bonds. He had a passion for plucking the hair out of other persons' heads; otherwise he was quite rational. He was very vain of his leather wristlets and his waist chain. The inconvenience of wearing them was balanced off by the distinction they gave him. He was most happy and cheerful, though, when he was with or near the little girl. She liked him tremendously. He told such splendid fairy tales.

Sometimes in the night, and more especially in a moonlit night, there came wailing cries from a certain secluded wing of one of the buildings; they went on for hour after hour. In her bed in the cottage the child could hear them as she dropped asleep, but they did not frighten her or give her bad dreams. She knew that when the fit passed the men and women who uttered those sounds would be quite friendly and quiet and that from them she need fear nothing.

Indeed, there were many among the inmates who would have died to protect her. She appreciated this fact, as it were, instinctively. She accepted their vagaries as verities; their delusions fitted in, often enough, with her childish conceptions of causes and effects. Her father made use of their devotion for his little daughter. When all else failed—cajolery or persuasion or disciplinary measures—there were certain patients who could be brought back from the beginnings of violent outbreaks by the threat that Hazel should not be permitted to speak with them or visit them. To Doctor Deeves it seemed perfectly proper that in controlling his more unruly charges he should invoke the power of his daughter's influence.

Nor could he see any possibility of harm coming to her from these associations. In his detached way he loved her as he loved his profession, which meant that he loved her with all his heart. For her he had all possible fatherly pride and devotion. He would have been the first, as often he told himself, to take her entirely away had he sensed peril of whatsoever sort for her in the life she lived. But he could sense none. All his own experiences and all the recorded experiences of authenticated neurologists from the earliest times to these present ones, told him that contact with the insane never had affected adversely the mentality of a sanely minded individual.

There were no data to support so fantastic a theory as the contrary of this.

Once his younger sister came on from Baltimore to visit him and she, being a spinster, naturally and inevitably had pronounced notions of her own touching on the rearing of children. She was decidedly afraid of this autocratic brother of hers, but eventually a solicitude for the welfare of her little niece rose above her fearsomeness and led her to remonstrate with him. She did not get very far. The contemptuousness which blazed from his eyes and made two hot little burning glasses of his spectacle lenses silenced her, even before he made answer.

"Henrietta," he bade her, "don't be a fool. Hazel is not lonely. I deny emphatically that she is lonely. Merely because she is thrown so little with other children is no sign that she is lonely. For a child, her life is remarkably full. She never lacks for a playfellow. She gives comfort to these patients and they give company and pleasure to her. According to my best observation and belief, she is happier in their society than when she is with children of her own age. She is never in the slightest danger from any of them. I doubt whether there is a patient here who would offer to injure her. Besides, some one of the staff—a nurse or a man attendant or one of my assistants—is always within sight and hearing and easy reach. What danger could there be?"

"I wasn't thinking of any physical danger, Edgar," said the sister. "But don't you think that such constant intimacy with persons whose minds are deranged may in the long run be bad for her own mind? That's what I was trying to say—what I meant—the mental and the temperamental results—and all."

"Henrietta," he snapped, "again I repeat, don't make a fool of yourself." He bit the words off sharp and hard. "Insanity invariably arises from certain sources—congenital causes, hereditary causes, from disease, from shock sometimes, from grief, from bad habits, from alcoholism, from other things. But it is not contagious. It is not an infection which floats about in the air. All my active life I have been in constant contact with every imaginable phase of insanity. Am I insane? Do you expect me to go insane?

"Bah! Hazel is all right. I only trust that when she grows up her future may be as well safeguarded as her childhood has been. Kindly endeavor to disabuse your mind of these silly fancies which you seem to have entertained concerning my daughter. And, whether or not you succeed in doing that, please do not refer to the matter again to me or to any other person about these premises. Above all, do not speak to Hazel—I'll have no false notions put in her innocent little head."

During the remainder of her visit Miss Henrietta Deeves steadfastly heeded the warn-

ing. No one else ever so much as dared to suggest to Doctor Deeves that the course he had followed, and still followed, in the bringing up of his daughter might be open to criticism.

So he went on, this earnest, conceited, single-purposed scientist, following his bent and never suspecting, even in his occasional hours of introspection, that in certain respects he was neglecting the child. Such education as she got—and in some respects it was thorough enough—she got from him. Such traveling as she did was done with him and none other, so that at home or abroad she dwelt constantly in the coils of his will and his personality. Frequently, even when she was with him, he was but half aware of her. He might love her dearly but she did not interest him—she was not a case. So she grew up to the edge of her womanhood and was pretty in a pallid, almost a colorless fashion, and at eighteen the enclosure behind the walls still was where she spent the greater part of her time and where she felt the greatest measure of peace and content.

It has taken this much space and this many words to bring Hazel Deeves forward to within a few weeks of her nineteenth birthday. Until now, her youth had been leisurely, placid, cloistered almost. Within the little mured community where she spent the greater part of her time one uneventful month had followed another without jar or jostle. For her, the place was like one of those quarters in the

Orient where the white foreigners bide, knowing little of the races that hive and swarm outside the sheltering compound.

Now, though, came an interruption in the smoothened and isolated currents of her life. The thing may be summed in a sentence or two. She met a young man, five years her senior, by name Stephen Shire; for months they were in daily contact. Without exactly witting it, she fell in love with him. He fell in love with her, too. But on his side there was knowledge of what was happening. Under conditions that were peculiar the affair went forward, ripening with rapidity. The condition was most peculiar, indeed. She was the daughter of the great psychiatrist and he was one of that distinguished gentleman's patients.

One day in the fall of the year this young man, Shire, was brought to Doctor Deeves's sanitarium. He had gone overseas as first lieutenant of a company in a National Guard regiment for service against Germany and had been invalided home, a victim of shell-shock, with nerves pitiably shattered and his body wasted. His state was bad enough when they brought him back to America; and several months in a government hospital did not help him. Indeed, he grew steadily worse; his mind showed signs of weakening.

His nearest of kin was an older brother, who also was co-heir with him to a considerable estate. This brother took certain legal steps

in conjunction with certain medical steps and the upshot of these proceedings was that a court, acting in the best of faith, declared the sufferer incompetent to care for himself or to administer his own affairs, and signed an order for his commitment to a suitable place of detention. So he was put into the capable hands of Doctor Deeves.

At the sanitarium, under treatment, he very soon showed signs of betterment. Mentally and physically he improved. But there was no hope, ever, for his complete recovery. Doctor Deeves himself said so, saying it with that finality and that unshakable emphasis which invariably marked his professional judgments. Eliminating the hard words and the long ones which enriched his speech, the situation in this case, as summed up and set forth by Doctor Deeves, left no room for doubt. Here it stood:

By reason of hardships and the strain he had undergone in France, the poor young man's reason irreparably had been overthrown. His malady was progressive and incurable. True, for a while he might show signs of mending—as, indeed, he already had done—and with proper care might at times appear to be quite rational. But one must not be deceived by such seemingly favorable indications; one must be guided by one's knowledge and one's experience; one must separate the prospects for a restoration to bodily health from the

mental aspects of the case. Regardless of any temporary rallies, this man was to be accepted as one indubitably and definitely cursed with the seeds of derangement. Sooner or later the quality of his derangement would increase. This, in brief, was Doctor Deeves's pronouncement. It is fair to assume that the decision did not altogether displease the older brother.

There is no telling just when the young ex-lieutenant first began to take an active interest in the girl or when she began to feel for him an emotion deeper than pity. Perhaps to both of them the quickening came at once. It is true that very soon after their first meeting each began to seek and to desire the company of the other. His listlessness would quit him at sight of her, coming along the walk toward where he sat, on fine mild days in the late fall, drawing in strength for his limbs from the sunshine and the air and the peace of outdoors; and his melancholia had quit him almost overnight. Her step would brisken as she neared him. She would read to him, he listening for hours on end, soothed and comforted by the sound of her voice and by the mere fact of her being near him.

In the winter, as he grew stronger, they walked together often. No one seemed to take cognizance of their growing intimacy. It was a part of the routine of the establishment that Miss Deeves should spend a part at least of nearly every day with this patient or that; her

presence in the wards or about the grounds was accepted as a matter of course by the attendants. Probably none of them thought to look for romance in such surroundings as these, where the faculty for loving, like all the other faculties, was skewed and out of joint.

So, then, this was how and why it was that, unsuspected by others and, in a way of speaking, unsuspected by her, the bond between these two grew and strengthened itself.

As vigor came back to his limbs and as his nerves untautened, he made her subject him to all possible tests of his sanity. He did this as much for her sake as for his own. Already he had convinced himself that, mentally, he was quite restored to the normal. His job now was to convince her of it. This being done and completely done, he told her his story—all of it.

It was such a story as those who deal with the inmates of an asylum hear often enough; it was such a story as she herself had heard many a time, all the while knowing the wildness of the claim set up by the one telling it. But this time she believed. He made her believe, and, besides, with all her heart she wanted to believe.

Even so, she must draw heavily upon what reserve of resolution she might have before she ventured to approach her father in Shire's behalf. You see, she knew her father much better than she knew herself; she knew that to ask him to consider revising his professional opinion would be almost in the nature of a personal

affront to him. Finally, though, she went, frightened inwardly but armed with a sense of the justice of her petition.

He listened without interruption to what she had to say. It was his way when opposed or questioned in his decisions to listen for a bit silently and then suddenly to blast the adversary with one fierce sweeping counter-volley. Successfully the citadel of his conceit never yet had been assaulted; it was impregnable. You cannot, with argument, breach a fortress so built as to be absolutely proof against such ammunition. His daughter was wise enough to attempt no extended argument. She set forth her case, rather, in the form of a claim—a plea for the reconsideration and the reopening of an issue closed.

It was a simple enough thing that she asked. And she started out, bravely enough, to ask it. If, toward the close of her speech, she faltered and stammered and repeated herself, it was because he sat there so quietly, with no change of expression, with no softening of the glower of disapproval that had formed on his face at those opening words from her which made clear the motive of her mission.

Doctor Deeves was exceedingly fond of his daughter, but not even the daughter of an absolute monarch may altogether be excused for lese-majesty to the father who must number his child among the subjects of his empire. Rebellion from those closest to the throne always

has been most abhorrent to despots. And Doctor Deeves, with the best intentions in the world, nevertheless and to the contrary notwithstanding, was a despot.

"Are you quite through?" he said, when finally she made an end of what she had come to say. "Very well, then; now kindly give heed to me: This is the only time you have ever offered, directly or indirectly, to interfere in the management of my institution. I hope it may continue to be the only time. If it were any other person on earth but you who presumed in this way upon my stock of forbearance, I know what the manner of my response would be. I think you also know what the manner of it would be. But because you are my own child I shall be patient with you. I shall do what I should not do in the case of another—I shall take the time required to show you how utterly wrong you are in coming to me with such a request as this one.

"I see very plainly what has happened. This young man's case has appealed to you; that is only natural. He is young; he has served his country in war; he has his whole life before him. But, my child, you must learn not to let your sympathies run away with your judgment.

"How often, in the course of a year or a month, is the charge set up by some person here —some person whom you know to be a lunatic —that he or she has been railroaded to this

place, has been unjustly deprived of freedom on a trumped-up claim of insanity made by designing kinspeople, with selfish or dishonorable or dishonest motives at the back of it all? I hear it said every day; so do you—the commonest delusion of common madmen—and said generally by individuals who at that very moment, by their behavior, their language or their looks, betray the fact that they are hopelessly insane.

"Now then, merely because, in this particular instance, the patient has somehow convinced you that for the moment at least he is seemingly rational, that is no reason to assume that he is the exception to the rule. To me, it merely is added proof of what I have known from the time he was brought here. I studied his case with my usual care; I diagnosed it, I passed on it. In the statement which I made at that time I predicted what would follow. I said that for a time he might, and probably would, show some improvement. But sooner or later he will relapse; there is no other prospect, no other possible contingency. He is here because he belongs here, or in some similar place. This is the sort of place where always he will belong. As I have just said, I gave a verdict in his case when he was brought to me. I pronounced it incurable then. I pronounce it incurable now—absolutely. So, my daughter, let us consider this incident as closed for all time to come."

The belligerent tone in his voice softened

somewhat: "Let me look at you, child? Hum, it strikes me you do not look well. You have been losing a little flesh, haven't you? And now that I think of it, it seems to me your appetite has been indifferent lately. I think I shall have to take you with me for a little change of air and scene on the next trip that I make. It will do you good to get away. And in the meantime I insist that you must not brood over things which are out of your control or beyond your understanding—remember, I insist on this." His eye strayed back to the mass of papers and printers' proofs on his desk.

"Well, now then, my dear, I think you'd better be running along. Concern yourself with what falls within your proper scope of activities. Just leave me to manage the professional side of this business. By your gauges I may be getting pretty old, but I'm not quite ready to retire yet awhile." He smiled at his conceit, and in his wiry beard the rows of firm, locked teeth showed like the tight edges of a strung trap.

So she went away from him and that afternoon when no one else was within earshot she told Stephen Shire what she had done and what the result of it had been.

It was early springtime by now, and the cherry tree under which they stood while she made her confession was a glorified bouquet of white blooms. She had acted on her own initiative; the original impulse had been hers

without any prompting from him, and all the while her plan was taking shape and her courage hardening for the interview with her father, he had been left in entire ignorance of the design.

He was not disappointed at the outcome; some weeks before he privately had besought Doctor Deeves to submit him to an examination, however rigorous, and the manner of the refusal had convinced him that in this quarter lay no hope for him. Rather, by what he heard now, he was relieved. There was pleasure to him in knowing that he had this gentle little champion and that she had confidence in him and the hardihood to make, in his interests, and singly, the appeal she just had made. The appeal had failed utterly; very well, then, he must move for his deliverance in other directions and by other ways.

He told her, that same afternoon, what he had in mind, making it plain to her that he might need her help; and she, who never before in word or deed had crossed or deceived her father, consented to aid him.

Circumstances ran together to aid the pair of young plotters. Either Doctor Deeves forgot or he postponed his intention of taking his daughter traveling with him.

Anyhow, he was engaged that spring in writing the last chapters of his book, his great authoritative work upon disorders of the brain. Also, a little later on, in June, he would go to one of the leading Eastern universities to re-

ceive an honorary degree. Doctor Deeves collected degrees as a stamp collector collects stamps; getting one made him covet more. His vanity exulted in the string of letters he might tail after his name. Just at present his time, which he never wasted, was to him especially precious.

So, taking note somewhat absently that his daughter gained none in flesh and that she seemed paler than common and was abstracted and almost moody, he bought a small car for her and insisted that she learn to run it and that she spend so many hours a day driving about the country.

Only in part, though, did she obey him. She learned to operate the runabout but she shirked the country drives. She would start out alone, but very soon she would come hurrying back. It was as though the wide open spaces daunted her; as though the ability to whiz along quiet lanes and over the smooth-surfaced turnpikes gave her no pleasure. Nevertheless, the fact that now she owned an automobile and was in all respects mistress of it exactly fitted into the scheme which young Shire was devising. On a day in the latter part of May, just after the noon hour, the two young people ran away together in the swift little car. Before this, though, there had been a deal of conspiring between them.

Under the sanitarium rules, a supervision was exercised over letters written by the

patients. Through Hazel Deeves's connivance Stephen Shire evaded the censorship. Secretly he wrote a letter to a man of consequence, a certain Colonel Dougherty, in whose regiment of the A. E. F. he had served, and this letter he smuggled into the girl's hands and she mailed it in the town, supplementing it with one of her own.

Colonel Dougherty's answer, addressed to her, came back promptly. With the evidence of his former lieutenant's own statement before him, every word in it bespeaking a rational and ordered mind, he could not help believing that Shire was the victim of a great and a cruel injustice, and, guided by that belief, he stood ready and willing to offer the protection and the assistance which Shire had asked of him; so the Colonel wrote. Let Shire make an escape from his confinement, and let him get safely into the state where Colonel Dougherty lived, which would mean out of the jurisdiction and beyond the ordinary legal processes of the state of which the young man was a citizen and in which he had been committed to detention. These things accomplished, Dougherty, for his part, promised to give him refuge under his roof and to furnish such surety as might be required for the orderly behavior of the fugitive and, finally, to invoke the proper authorities, whoever they might be, for an impartial hearing before an impartial tribunal with a view to establishing the present mental

competency of his friend. As Dougherty understood the case, what Shire desired was, first, his liberty and then a chance to prove his sanity. After that, in the Federal courts, he might seek redress against his brother for his denied property rights. The Colonel was no lawyer but he had heard, he said, of similar cases in which this procedure had been followed with success.

Now, Dougherty was a man of influence and consequence; his help would be a tower of strength, as Shire made plain to the girl. There was yet a further fact operating in the prisoner's favor. From the asylum gates to the river which marked the western boundary of the state, the distance was less than twenty miles. Even over indifferent roads an automobile could cover it in an hour or less. And Dougherty lived in a small city on the opposite bank of the river not ten miles north of where the refugee—if he succeeded in getting away from his warders—would cross by the ferry which plied between the shores. With a fair share of luck, one more main difficulty would be ironed out to smoothness.

The escape was simplicity itself; nothing delayed it and no alarm followed it. On the appointed day, just after luncheon had been eaten, young Shire came forth from the dining hall of the building in which he was lodged. On the lawn, as if by chance, he met the girl. Casually they walked diagonally through the

grounds to where an elderly man named James Eggers sat on duty in his regular post alongside the main gates which opened in the east wall.

At a word from Miss Deeves, Eggers, touching his cap in salute, let them pass through. At least a third of the patients, including nearly all held to be harmless and known ordinarily to be well behaved, were allowed, under suitable escort, to leave the enclosure for cross-country strolls; a few even were permitted to accompany the attendants to the town. Their absence for hours, even for a whole forenoon or a whole afternoon, would not be regarded with concern. Shire, these last few months, had been listed in this favored group. True, by the regulations a nurse or a male keeper should now be with him. But in Eggers's eyes the daughter of his employer was, in effect, a qualified member of the administrative staff. If she elected to stand sponsor for this young fellow the responsibility would be hers.

Suspecting nothing, the gatekeeper watched them until they passed from his sight along the graveled drive that skirted the wall. He had not taken notice that Miss Deeves was very white and that she was trembling. His one glance of official scrutiny had been for the patient and about the latter the gatekeeper had seen nothing which was calculated to make him look a second time. He settled back in his chair and lighted his pipe. The warm soft air invited him to loaf and forget

his private worries—if he had any such. He need not think again of the pair until toward evening.

An eighth of a mile away, under the rear wall of the compound, the girl's car, with oil cups and gas tank newly filled, stood where she had left it half an hour before. No one saw them mount to its seat; no one who knew either of the pair saw them driving southward along a back road to where it joined the turnpike running to the west. Westward then they traveled, going rapidly. In the run to the river they stopped only once; that was at a small railroad station, where Shire handed a rush message, which had been written beforehand, and a coin in payment, to a listless person serving there as train dispatcher and telegraph agent.

They drove on then, with speed, until they came to the edge of a slope where the shelving bank went down to meet the mile-wide river. The ferryboat, a clumsy, double-ended craft, was in midstream, headed their way but making slow work of it against the strong current. They would have at least twenty minutes to wait, and perhaps half an hour, before the boat landed and put ashore what freight she had brought and began her return trip.

Of pursuit before dark there was now little danger. Looking back frequently as they sped along, young Shire had seen behind him no signs to suggest a chase. By heavy odds of

probability he was quite safe—certainly as safe as he could hope to be until he touched the soil of the adjoining state. Nevertheless, it was at his suggestion that the car turned off the road into the thick fringing of hazel bushes and stunted haws that ran along the brow of the low ridge above the landing. Here in this shielded place they were out of sight of any save an especially keen-eyed passer-by. In part, this move was dictated by his instincts of prudence, in part by another purpose which he had in mind.

In due time the ferryboat came to bank, discharged her cargo, took on another and headed away again for the opposite shore. No automobile went aboard her, though, but only a couple of farm wagons and a dusty buggy. Nor was there a young man or a young girl among the foot-passengers. Three countrymen and an old woman and a small boy made up the list of passengers.

In his own automobile on the far shore waited Colonel Dougherty. He had received a telegram half an hour before; he had come swiftly to the crossing place to meet his friend. He waited and waited until nightfall, then drove homeward, alone and perplexed by apprehensions.

Along towards four o'clock of this same May afternoon Doctor Deeves sat in his library, which was a room opening off the reception hall

of his cottage. Since luncheon he had been there, making final revision of the proofs of his book—the book that would live long after he was gone, bearing his knowledge down to enrich the learning of men in generations yet to come. Subconsciously he heard the front door open and close. Then his own door was flung open and there before him stood one of his charges, this young man, Stephen Shire. The famous specialist laid down his pen and reared back in his swivel chair; he was mildly startled by the intrusion. His patients did not have the run of his private residence, naturally. Even so, Doctor Deeves retained the unruffled magisterial air which he used in his intercourse with the inmates of his asylum.

"Well," he said, "what does this mean?"

"It means I've come back," said the younger man. He was breathing hard as though under great stress, and now Doctor Deeves saw that the intruder's face was streaked with dust and his clothing, too.

"You've come back, eh?" he said soothingly. He was accustomed to vagaries and hallucinations; he flattered himself he knew how to deal with them. Doctor Deeves was forever flattering himself on one count or another. "And where have you been?"

"Twenty miles away—and twenty miles back. I ran away from here—two hours and a half ago. Hold on!" He spoke out sharply as Doctor Deeves's hand reached toward a push button

set in the wall just behind him. "You needn't ring that bell. Nobody at the sanitarium knows I got away, I think. I haven't been missed yet. Nobody need know. I come back of my own free will. And I brought her back with me."

"Her?" Doctor Deeves half lifted from his chair. He knew now he was confronted by realities, not by delusional fancies; a quick suspicion was rising in his mind. "Her? Who do you mean?"

"Your daughter, Hazel Deeves. It was in her car that I got away. I drove it—but she went with me. Wait—I didn't steal her—I didn't abduct her. She helped me get away. But we've both come back—God help us—yes, and God help you, too!"

"Why that? Where is she? What has happened, man?" Doctor Deeves was scarcely aware—and yet somehow was definitely aware—that he spoke now as one rational man to another rational man. He had shed his professional manner as a runner might shed a garment, hindering him. He was all the concerned father—the imperturbable scientist, with the pose of infallibility, had vanished utterly.

"She's upstairs in her own room—safe enough—she hasn't been hurt in any way. Sit down! Don't go to her yet. Wait until you hear what I have to tell you."

It was as though Shire gave his orders with due authority to give them. Mechanically the older man obeyed. All at once now the young

ex-soldier dominated the room. He thrust his head forward, fairly flinging his words in the other's face. His intensity armed him with a sort of straightforward eloquence:

"Doctor Deeves, listen: I'm a sane man—you've got to believe that. And here's another thing you've got to believe because in another minute or two I'll be proving it to you—I love your daughter. And she loves me. If you'd been able to see anything except the things you're interested in, you'd have seen it months ago. But you—you couldn't see—you were blind. Oh, my God, how blind you've been!

"She loves me—she loved me well enough to plot with me to get away from this place today. We made for the river. I've got friends on the other side who'd have helped me prove my case—friends standing ready to provide me with funds until I could get back what rightfully belongs to me. Never mind that now. She loved me well enough to be willing to come back here after I'd gotten beyond your reach—to come back alone and face you and your anger.

"But I had a different plan in my mind. I didn't tell it to her, though, until we were within sight of the crossing. Then I told her—then I began to plead with her to go on with me to the other side and when we were on that other side, to marry me. That was what I begged her to do—at the first, until——

"But wait, I'll go back a little so you'll un-

derstand more clearly; I've been going ahead too fast in what I'm telling you.

"As we were making for the river I felt confident and overjoyed and not a bit worried over the final outcome. I was beating you at your own game; I was sure I could keep on beating you. The human being I loved best in all this world was with me, helping me. But somehow she seemed very much frightened. She kept trembling. She was as white as death. Suddenly I realized how frail she was and how wasted and thin. Like a little pale shadow! She kept looking about her on every side as though she expected enemies would be hiding behind every tree and every bush. I tried to soothe her.

"And then, when we'd got to the river and the ferry was in sight, coming toward us, I started to tell her the rest of my purpose; the biggest part of it. I told her I was no such coward as to induce her to help me get away and then let her come back alone to face the consequences. I told her how deeply I loved her and how sure I felt of my sanity and how certain I was of my ability to care for her. I begged her to go on across that river with me.

"She told me she couldn't. Not that she didn't care for me. I knew, without her telling me, that she cared for me. She said she couldn't go because she was afraid. I asked her what she was afraid of—was it me she feared? She said, no. She said—oh, listen, man, while I

tell you what she said!—she said she must get back inside these walls here. She said this was the only place she felt safe. She said that away from here she was in danger. Still, I thought she was only overwrought, that the excitement had been too much for her. I asked her what danger there could possibly be.

"And she said—pointing with her poor shaking finger this way and that—she said: 'Stephen, they're squatting here in these bushes all about us. I can't see them but I can hear them and I know how they look. I didn't tell you of them before but now I must tell you. They have black masks on their faces and they've long, shiny blowpipes in their hands. They're waiting to blow their poisonous vapors at me. They'll destroy me when you're gone unless I go back and get inside the wall. They won't dare follow me in there. But out in the world, even with you, I'll never be safe, Stephen. There's only one place where I ever will be safe from them.'

"That's what your daughter, Hazel Deeves, said to me, Doctor Deeves!

"So I turned around and I brought her back —brought her back to the only fit place for her to be. And I came back because I love her, because I couldn't desert her now, because I want to be near her when she's cured.

"Oh, man, man, man, don't you see what you've done? You kept her here all her life with mad people about her. You didn't think

that contact with them could hurt her—I heard her say months ago that that was your belief. And you—all so blind and besotted in your own egotism—you didn't see that her loss of flesh and her loss of spirits meant anything. You didn't see what was beginning to prey on her, didn't see that a strain or a shock might carry her across the dividing line. You, who are supposed to know so much of mental diseases, and she, your own flesh and blood, your own daughter—and still you couldn't see it—could you?

"But now, by God, you've got to see it! She's mad, Doctor Deeves, she's mad, I tell you. Go up yonder to her room—go speak with her and see for yourself. That's all. You'll find me here when you come back."

And Doctor Deeves went. He went running.

All the fire and force seemed to go out of the young ex-lieutenant in a puff. He fell down on his knees upon the floor, his arms on the littered desk-top and his face in his arms. He was still there fifteen minutes later when stumbling, fumbling footsteps sounded on the stairs outside the door. He lifted his head as the uncertain footfalls came into the room where he was, and seeing before him then a figure of a shrunken broken man, stripped of all arrogance, physically twisted by an anguish that racked and wrenched his frame and made him years older in a breath of time, the young man for all his

own grief could not but feel a pang of pity for the other.

You'd hardly have known this man, so marred and altered as he was, for the eminent Doctor Deeves.

CHAPTER IX

THE SECOND COMING OF A FIRST HUSBAND

IF only Mrs. Thomas Bain had been content to compare Mr. Thomas Bain with men about him he, for his counter-arguments, would not have been put to a serious disadvantage. Out of her ammunition locker he might have borrowed shells to be fired in his own defense. Did she, for instance, cite the polished beauty of Mr. So-and-So's drawing-room behavior, speaking with that subtle inflection which as good as said that his own society manners left much to be desired, Mr. Bain's rebuttal would have been prompt and ready: He would have spoken right up to point out the fact that So-and-So notoriously neglected his family or that he drank entirely too much for his own good or that he habitually failed to pay his just debts. Mr. Bain was no scandal-monger, understand, still a man must fight back with such weapons as he may command.

But Mrs. Bain's method of attack was en-

tirely too subtle for him; it left him practically weaponless. Out in the world he amply was competent to fend for himself. Beneath the domestic roof-tree, when his wife sat in judgment on him, and his ways, on his small shortcomings or his larger faults, he completely was at a loss for proper rebuttal. It gave him such a helpless feeling! It would have given any normal man a helpless feeling. And Mr. Bain was in all essential regards a normal man —a good citizen, a good provider and, as husbands go, an average fair husband.

I would do Mrs. Bain no injustice. She was a normal woman, too. But it is only natural when destiny has fashioned an advantage to fit one's hands that one employs it. Her advantage was a very great one. Her criticisms of Mr. Bain took the form of measuring him off against the mental picture of her first husband.

And her first husband was dead. Now, in common decency, an honorable man—and Mr. Bain was an honorable man—may not speak ill of the dead. What is more, had he, under stress of provocation, been minded to retort that after all Mrs. Bain's first husband was not exactly perfection either, he could have produced no proof in support of the assertion. For he had never seen his predecessor. He knew nobody who had known the deceased. The present Mrs. Bain had been for three years a widow when first he set eyes on her. She had lately returned then from Honolulu; it was in

Honolulu that she had been bereft, as the saying is, by the hand of death. And Honolulu is a long distance from Brockway, Mass., where Tom Bain's people, a stay-at-home stock, had lived these five generations past.

So, on those frequently recurring occasions when Mrs. Bain, with a saddened, almost a wistful, air was moved to remind herself of her first husband's marvelous qualities—his temperament, his flawless disposition, his tact, his amiability or what not—there was for her second husband nothing to do except to suffer on in an impotent silence. It is not well that anyone on this earth—and more especially a husband—should be required to suffer discomforts in silence. Suffering calls for vocal expression.

Otherwise, as human beings go, Mr. and Mrs. Bain were well suited, one for the other. It was that dead first husband of hers, who, invoked by her, kept rising up to mar the reasonable happiness which might have been theirs. The thing was getting on his nerves. Indeed, at the time this account begins, it already had got upon his nerves. He had come to the point where frequently he wished there had never been such a thing as a first husband.

There were times when he almost permitted himself the wish that there never had been such things as second husbands, either.

With the acute vividness of a war-scarred veteran remembering the time he was shot, he could recall the occasion when Mrs. Bain's first

husband first came into his life. They had been married only a few weeks; the honeymoon was over; he who always had traveled singly was adjusting himself to the feel of double harness. This was an easier job for the lady than for her mate; she had been through the process once before. But while Tom Bain might be a green hand at this business of being married, still subconsciously he already was beginning to adjust himself in his ordained and proper place in the matrimonial scheme as it related to him and this very charming lady. In other words, he had reached the period where he was slipping out of the bridegroom pose into the less studied and more matter-of-fact status of a husband. He was ready to quit acting a part and be his own self again always, though with regard for the limitations and restrictions imposed by the new estate upon which he had entered.

The campaign against him—we may as well call it a campaign—opened on the evening following their return from the trip to White Sulphur. That first day at his desk had been a hard one; so much which seemed to require his personal attention had accumulated while he was away. He left the office pretty well fagged out. On his way home he built up a pleasant vision of a nice quiet little dinner and then a peaceful hour or so in the living-room in slippers and an old smoking jacket.

Mrs. Bain met him at the door with a greet-

ing that put him in thorough good humor. This, he decided, was the best of all possible worlds to live in and his, undoubtedly, was the best of all possible ways of living.

"You're late, dearest," she said. "You've just time to run upstairs and slip on your evening clothes. I've laid them out for you."

"Why, there's nobody coming in for dinner, is there?" he asked.

She drew away from him slightly.

"No, there's no one coming," she said. "What difference does that make?"

"Well," he said, "I'm rather tired and so I sort of thought that, seeing there'd be only the two of us, I'd come to the table just as I am."

"Very well, dear," she said, "suit yourself."

But he took note that she had briefened the superlative "dearest" to the shorter word "dear." Also she slipped herself out of the circlet of his encircling arm. Suddenly there was a suggestion—a bare hint—of an autumnal chill in the air.

"Suit yourself," she repeated.

But, as a newly married man, how could he suit himself? He clad himself in the starchy shirt, the high tight collar that nipped his throat, the pinchy patent leathers and all the rest of the funereal regalia in which civilized man encases himself on any supposedly festal occasion. She gave him an approving look when ten minutes later he presented himself before her.

"Tom," she said as they sat down, "I think you always should dress for dinner. Arthur always said that a gentleman should dress for dinner."

He stared at her, puzzled for a moment.

"Arthur?" he echoed.

"My first husband," she explained. "Arthur looked so well in his evening clothes."

"Oh," he said, like that. That was all he said for a minute or so. He was thinking.

She was thinking, too. Practically all women are popularly supposed to have intuition, and certainly this particular woman had her share of it. Probably it was in that very moment of reflection that the lady decided on a future plan of action.

At any rate, this was the beginning. Eventually, Mr. Bain awoke to a realization that he was the victim of a gentle tyranny—that he had fallen captive to an enemy force made up of an affectionate but somewhat masterful lady and the memory of a dead and gone personality. Mrs. Bain's first husband was persistently dogging Mrs. Bain's second husband. Daily, after one fashion or another, he was reminded of Arthur. Arthur, it seemed, had never lost his temper. What made the comparison hurt the more was the indubitable fact that Mr. Bain occasionally did lose his. Arthur had never raised his voice above a well low-pitched key of innate refinement—no matter how irritated he might be. Arthur had been so tidy;

Arthur never left his clothes lying about where he dropped them. Arthur had never given her a cross word in all the seven years of their life together. Arthur invariably had been so considerate of her feelings. It was Arthur this and it was Arthur that; she realized her power and she used it. Mrs. Bain's first husband was ever, so to speak, at the elbow of Mrs. Bain's second husband, by proxy chiding him, admonishing him, correcting him, scolding him, even. And for all that he was a naturally sunny-natured and most companionable person, Mrs. Bain's second husband, at the end of the first year of his married life, was in a fair way to become a most unhappy person. Their matrimonial craft was sliding down the rapids toward a thundering Niagara and she didn't realize it and he, thoroughly under the dominion of forces with which he found himself somehow powerless to cope, only dimly and dully appreciated the peril. He wanted above all things to have and to hold his wife until death did them part. But always there was Arthur tagging along, making a crowd of three out of what might have been a congenial company of two.

But, as someone has most aptly said, it's always darkest just before the dawn. In this instance, though, deliverance came to the oppressed, not with the graduations of the spreading dawn but rather with the solid emphasis of a bolt from the blue. There was an evening of bridge with the Tuckers and Bain, who played

well, had for a partner Mrs. Tucker who didn't. It is barely possible that he had betrayed a passing emotion of testiness once or twice. At midnight as they were entering their house Mrs. Bain renewed her remarks on an issue to which reference already had been made on the way home in the cab.

"My dear," she was saying, "I really must repeat again that, to my way of thinking, no amount of exasperation could have justified you in showing your feelings as you did show them at least twice at that cardtable. Now, Arthur would never——"

At this instant Mr. Bain's finger found the push-button just inside the jamb of the living-room door and the lights flashed on. What next ensued—the vocal part of it, I mean—might have suggested to an eavesdropper, had there been one, that the vowel sounds were being repeated by two persons laboring under a strong excitement.

"Ay?" That was his startled ejaculation.

"E-e-e-e!" A shrill outcry, part scream, part squeal, from her.

"I—I—" Mr. Bain again.

"Oh!" Mrs. Bain's turn.

"You!" Her startled gasp of recognition.

"Yes, Evelyn, that's who it is." This, in matter-of-fact tones, was a third voice speaking.

After this for a moment the spell of a terrific stupefaction held both Mr. and Mrs. Bain silent.

Standing in the middle of the floor facing them, was a shadow. I use the language advisedly. With equal propriety I might write down "apparition" or "wraith" or "shape" or "spirit" to describe that which confronted them. I prefer the word "shadow."

It had the outline, somewhat wavery and uncertain, of a man. It had the voice of a man—a voice calm, assured, almost casual. It had the garb of a man or at least it had the nebulous faint suggestion of garbing. But it had no substance to it, none whatsoever. It had no definable color, either. It had rather the aspect of a figure of man done in lines of very thin smoke. You could look right through it and distinguish, as through a patch of haze, the pattern of the wall-paper behind it. And now, as it spoke again, you could in some indefinable sort of way see its voice starting from down in its chest and traveling on up and up and so out at its lips. It was no more than a patch of fog, modeled by some unearthly magic into the semblance of a human form. It was inconceivable, impossible, an incredible figment of the imagination, and yet there it was.

Its second speech was addressed to Mr. Bain, who had frozen where he was, his finger still touching the push-button, his eyes enlarged to twice their size and his lower jaw sagged.

"You are astonished? Permit me to introduce myself. I am Arthur—Mrs. Bain's first husband. I am glad to meet you."

Mr. Bain came to himself all of a sudden. The shackles of twelve months of bottled-in restraint fell from him.

"Are you?" he answered. "Well, I'm damned if I'm glad to meet you."

"I understand." The voice was gentle, almost compassionate. "But you will be glad later on, I think—very glad. Shall we sit down, all of us?"

The Thing took a chair. And the back of the chair cloudily revealed itself as a sub-motif for the half-materialized torso of its occupant. Mechanically, moving jerkily, Mr. Bain followed suit; he also took a chair. Mrs. Bain, uttering whimpering sounds down in her throat, already had fallen upon a couch and was huddled there. It was just as well the couch had been handily near by, for her legs would no longer support her.

Her first husband—we may as well call him that—turned to her.

"Control yourself, Evelyn," he bade her. "There is no occasion for any excitement. Besides, those curious sounds which you are now emitting annoy me. I haven't long to stay and I have much to say."

He cleared his throat—the process might be followed by the eye as well as with the ear—and proceeded:

"I have been endeavoring for months past to bring about this meeting. In fact, ever since shortly after your second marriage to this gen-

tleman. I have sought to return to earth for the one purpose which brings me tonight. But it was difficult—very difficult." He sighed a visible sigh. "It is not permitted that I should explain the nature of the obstacles. I merely say that they were very great. As you will notice, I am not able to even yet attain the seeming solidity—the weight and specific density which I craved to take on. So I just came along in the somewhat sketchy and incomplete guise in which you now see me.

"My reason for coming is simple. I desire to see justice done. Where I was, I could not rest in peace knowing that you, Evelyn, were lying so outrageously and, what was worse, making me an unwitting accomplice, as it were, to your lying.

"Evelyn, you have been a wicked woman. You have done this gentleman here—" including Mr. Bain with a wave of a spectral arm—"a cruel wrong. But what, from my point of view, is even worse, you have done me a grave wrong as well. I may be only a memory—I may say that that precisely is what I am—but even a memory has its feelings, its sense of responsibility, its obligations to itself.

"Very well, having made that point clear, I shall proceed: Sir, for nearly a year past you have been intimidated by the constantly presented image of a paragon. Am I not right? Your peace of mind has been seriously affected. And I resent the slander on my name. It has

been an insult which no self-respecting memory should be compelled to stand. Sir, I wish you to know the truth: I was not a paragon, and I thank God for it. I was not the perfect husband this woman would have you believe. I was fussy, faulty, crotchety—and I am proud of it!"

"Oh, Arthur!" Mrs. Bain, under attack, was reviving, rallying to her own defense as powers of coherent speech returned to her.

"Don't 'Oh, Arthur' me—but listen. And you, too, sir, if you will be so good? We quarreled frequently in those years of our married life. She complained of my brusque ways, of my fits of irritability, of my refusal to like many of the people that she persisted in liking, of my tastes and my habits and inclinations. She didn't care for some of my friends; I didn't care for many of hers. I objected to any number of things about her—and rarely refrained from saying so. She has told you that between us there was never a cross word. *Bah!*—there were tens of thousands of cross words. When we got on each other's nerves, which was often, neither of us hesitated to let it be known. When we disagreed over something—or anything—we argued it out—quarreled it out, frequently. We loved each other, it is true, but merely loving did not make either of us angelic. We fell out and made up and fell out again. There were times when we were like a pair of cooing doves and again there were times when the pro-

verbial monkey and parrot had little, if anything, on us. In short, and in fine, sir, we behaved just as the average reasonably well-mated married couple do behave. And for my own sake, and incidentally for yours, sir, I would not have you believe differently.

"That, I believe, is practically all I had to say to you. Having said it, I wish to add a final word to our wife, here. Evelyn, speaking with such authority as is befitting a first husband, I wish to state that, so far as my observations from another sphere have gone, your present husband is a first-rate fellow. I like to think of him as my successor. And I intend to see that he has a fair deal from you. I trust this visit from me has been a lesson to you. Hereafter, in your dealings with him you will please be so good as to stand on your own merits. You will kindly refrain from dragging me into your arguments as an advocate on your side. My stock of patience is no greater than it was before I became a memory—remember that. I sincerely trust it will not be necessary for me to admonish you personally a second time. Because I warn you here and now that next time I shall return under circumstances that may be most embarrassing to you. Next time there will be no privacy about my appearance; I shall appear to you in public. You'll be a talked-about woman, Evelyn. There'll be pieces about you in the paper and spiritualists and trance mediums and delvers

into the occult—a meddlesome nosey lot, too, I may add—will make your life a burden for you. So have a care, Evelyn!

"Sir, to you I extend my best wishes. I'm sorry we didn't meet before. Well, some of these days we'll make up for lost time—when you join me on the plane where I am at present residing. Well, I guess that will be about all. . . . Oh, if you don't mind, I'll just dissipate into air and float up the chimney—it's more convenient." Out of a nothingness near the fireplace came a voice growing thinner and fainter: "Good-bye, Bain, old chap; good-bye, Evelyn—and don't forget."

It was at this juncture that Mrs. Bain went off into a swoon. It also should be noted down that even as he sprang to her side to revive her Mr. Bain wore on his face a look of husbandly solicitude and concern, but his feet twittered in a dance measure.

Personally, I do not believe in ghosts. I assume, reader, that you do not believe in ghosts, either. But Mrs. Bain does, and as for Mr. Bain he does, too, firmly—and as a happily married man is each day renewing and strengthening his belief in them.

THE END